

## the stars and their children

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/38524837) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/38524837>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a> , <a href="#">Dream SMP</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Wilbur Soot &amp; TommyInnit</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot &amp; Phil Watson</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot &amp; Technoblade</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot &amp; Technoblade &amp; TommyInnit &amp; Phil Watson</a> , <a href="#">Niki   Nihachu &amp; Wilbur Soot</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Aimee   Aimsey (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Eret (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Space</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Royalty</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot and TommyInnit are Siblings</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson is Not Tommyinnit's Parent (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson is Not Wilbur Soot's Parent</a> , <a href="#">Politics</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Science Fiction</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot-centric</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot is Not Okay</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot Needs a Hug</a> , <a href="#">Brotherly Love</a> , <a href="#">Family Dynamics</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Fluff and Angst</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Traumatized Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Traumatized TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Complicated Relationships</a> , <a href="#">Dysfunctional Family</a> , <a href="#">Outer Space</a> , <a href="#">Dark Sleepy Bois Inc, but not like in the possessive way</a> , <a href="#">Inspired by Dune</a> , <a href="#">but not an au of it</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of <a href="#">and the stars reached back</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Rebel's favorite fics!(smp)</a> , <a href="#">holygrailoffics</a> , <a href="#">incomplete v good fics</a> , <a href="#">I LOVE SPACE FICS</a> , <a href="#">Fics that have (and continue to) ruin me</a> , <a href="#">So many books so little time!!</a> , <a href="#">fics that i absolutely adore</a>
Stats:	Published: 2022-04-21 Completed: 2023-01-14 Words: 269,006 Chapters: 29/29

# the stars and their children

by [bonesandthebees \(bonesandcacti\)](#)

## Summary

*Yes. Wilbur had to bite his tongue to keep the answer from spilling out of his mouth, because yes he wanted more. Of course he wanted more. He wanted to be more than the bastard prince. He wanted to be more than a mistake his mother made before she married Tommy's father.*

*But that wasn't the role he had been cast for in his life.*

*"It doesn't matter," Wilbur said instead. "When Tommy turns eighteen he'll be crowned King, and I will be his advisor. He'll be a good king, I'll make sure of it."*

or, as the bastard prince of the planet of Eldingvegr, Wilbur has always known he was never meant for greatness. That was his younger brother's destiny. Wilbur's job was simply to try and make sure Tommy could fulfill that destiny.

That becomes decidedly more difficult when the brothers are betrayed, and are forced to flee their home planet. With the Essempi Empire being one of the largest imperial powers in the universe, the only place that can offer them refuge from Emperor Dream is Zephys IV—capital planet of the Antarctic Empire, ruled by the ruthless Emperor Philza.

(aka, space royalty au)

## Notes

HELLO EVERYONE I AM FINALLY ABLE TO POST THIS

oh my god I have been so excited to start posting this for so long now. at the moment I'm still focusing on finishing my other long fic, the world forgetting by the world forgot, so I'm not going to start regularly updating that until that's over. but once I finish that, this will become my main project!

I have so much worldbuilding done for this au, it's insane. I've literally been planning this since November 2021 right after I first watched Dune. It just inspired me so much because I've always loved the idea of royal politics but in space, so I came up with this! now, on that note, **THIS IS NOT AN AU OF DUNE**. yes, there are similar elements to Dune, but the worldbuilding is entirely original so please don't say it's an au of Dune because that implies my worldbuilding isn't mine when a lot of effort was put into it

ok moving on this is going to be the first long form work of mine that is told solely in Wilbur's POV instead of Tommy's, so I hope you guys don't mind that. But don't worry, this fic is crimeboys centric so Tommy is the other main character besides Wilbur. He gets plenty of focus!

ALSO HUGE PROPS TO MABS (moonfly on ao3) FOR HELPING ME WORLDBUILD FOR THIS!!! she's basically my co-creator with this entire au, so much stuff in here they came up with and this au literally would not have happened without them and i'm so insanely lucky to have them to brainrot over this thing with, because we've been brainrotting over this fic together since, like, november. so huge shoutout to her!!

anyway I'm just so so hyped to finally get to post the first chapter of this, I didn't mean for it to be as long as it is but think of it as a really long intro to the world lmao. as always, I base my characterization off the characters from the dsmp and not the cc's!

hope you guys enjoy!

# sing to me muse of a boy of many turns

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hey Wil, can you hand me the epli?”

Wilbur glanced down at the bowl of fruit sitting in front of him, his eyes skimming over the bright red skin of the epli that sat on top. He almost reached out to grab it so he could toss it to Tommy, but then he paused.

Turning his head, Wilbur looked across the sitting room and saw his little brother stretched out across the couch, his golden hair nearly shining against the shimmering silver of the velvet couch cushions. Tommy’s boots had been abandoned near the door, and Wilbur noticed he was wearing one black sock and one blue sock as he kicked his feet over the edge of the couch’s arm. To say the least, he looked comfortable as could be, and clearly didn’t want to get up himself to get the epli to snack on.

Which gave Wilbur an idea.

“Make me,” he replied evenly, leaning back in his own chair.

Tommy sat up so he could meet Wilbur’s eyes over the back of the couch, and frowned. “Wha- don’t be a bitch! Just toss me the epli!”

Wilbur smirked and ran his fingers over the grooves in the silvery wood of the table he was sitting at. “I said to make me give it to you.”

Realization dawned in Tommy’s eyes, and he let out a loud groan as he fell back onto the couch. “C’mon Wilbur, I don’t wanna practice right now, it’s hard!”

“Tommy, if you don’t practice it’s never going to get easier,” Wilbur reminded him.

“I *know*, you tell me that every single day,” Tommy grumbled, dragging his hands down his face. “But I just don’t feel like it right now!”

Wilbur shrugged. “Guess you’re not getting the epli then.” He continued to eye the fruit in the bowl in front of him, watching Tommy from his peripheral vision.

His little brother was stubborn, Wilbur would give him that. But Tommy was also lazy. Even though he was fifteen and far too tall to be carried around, he still tried to get Wilbur to give him piggyback rides all around the palace. Admittedly, while Wilbur did end up giving him those rides more often than not, he wasn’t going to give in so easily on this. If Tommy wanted the epli, either he was going to have to get up and grab it himself, or he was going to need to practice his Voice.

He watched the internal debate play out across Tommy’s face for a few moments. It was painfully easy to read Tommy’s expressions, and Wilbur knew that was something that was

going to have to be trained out of him eventually.

But for now, at fifteen Tommy wore his heart on his sleeve. And because of that, Wilbur knew the second Tommy decided he was going to try and practice his Voice.

Eyes fluttering shut, Wilbur watched as Tommy repeated the breathing exercises he'd taught the boy so long ago. His body sunk into the couch cushions as he relaxed, and Wilbur waited with a hopeful smile as Tommy's eyes flickered open again.

*"Give me the epli,"* Tommy ordered, his Voice holding a strange echoing quality that bounced off the walls of the room.

Deep inside his chest, Wilbur felt a tug. It was the urge to reach out and grab the epli so he could toss it in Tommy's direction. His hand hovered, halfway stretched out to the fruit bowl, but it was all too easy to ignore the command and pull his hand back to his lap.

"You're going to have to do better than that," Wilbur teased with a smirk.

Tommy scowled. Guess he was going to have to show his little brother how it was done.

Closing his eyes, Wilbur took a steadying breath. He let the ocean inside of himself settle, doing the same breathing exercise as Tommy to clear his head.

*In for four, out for eight. Rinse and repeat until the waves stop crashing in your head.*

The waves lapping at the edges of his mind slowed, their rhythmic push and pull growing softer and softer until it disappeared completely.

Then, he opened his eyes.

*"Come take the epli,"* Wilbur ordered. His Voice wasn't just his voice as he spoke. It was thousands of Voices layered on top of each other. The Voices of his ancestors, Voices that reverberated through your skull with commands that forced their way into your very cells. A siren's command filled every part of your body, so it was impossible to do anything but obey it.

As soon as Wilbur let his Voice slip from his lips, Tommy's eyes glazed over, and he jumped to his feet to rush around the couch. He stumbled towards the table and snatched the apple out of the bowl. Then, once the fruit was in his grasp, his eyes cleared up, and he blinked a few times as he came back to himself.

Realizing what Wilbur had done, Tommy frowned and slapped his arm as hard as he could, the sharp sting making Wilbur yelp in pain.

"You're such a bitch boy, Wilbur!" Tommy snapped, taking a vicious bite out of the epli with a loud *crunch!* "You just like to show off that you can do the freaky voice thing way better than I can!"

"The only reason I can use my Voice better is because I actually practiced it growing up," Wilbur told him, chuckling at Tommy's childish frustration as he stormed back over to the

couch. “It wasn’t always this easy for me, and it won’t get any easier for you unless you practice.”

“But it hurtsssss,” Tommy whined, dramatically dropping onto the couch and taking another bite of the epli. “It makes my throat all scratchy when I try to do it!”

Well, Wilbur knew all about how painful practicing your Voice could be. As a child, it wasn’t at all uncommon for him to have lost his voice completely from practicing so much the day before. So many nights had been spent whispering commands at Niki, the two of them huddled under the blankets on his bed as he tried to perfectly mimic her pitch and tone.

Niki’s pitch was always steady, never wavering like Wilbur’s did. It took far longer for her throat to get scratchy from using her Voice, and whenever she used even the simplest command on Wilbur, it was near impossible for him to fight against it.

Tommy didn’t stay up night after night practicing commands until he couldn’t speak at all. He rarely took Wilbur up on his offer to practice mimicking his pitch and tone. In fact, he didn’t have that much of a desire to learn how to use his Voice at all. No desire to learn, and no desperation to have *something* for himself, to hold onto one tiny piece of their mother and prove that he had something inside of him that made him valuable.

No, Tommy didn’t have any of that desperation because he knew how valuable he was. Wilbur supposed that kind of confidence came with being the Crown Prince, because there wasn’t a single person in the palace that didn’t treat Tommy like he was made of gold.

Wilbur was decidedly... not thought of in the same way.

Before he could spiral into that train of thought, the door to the sitting room opened, and Wilbur grinned when he spotted a familiar head of pink hair walking through the door.

“Niki!”

Tommy bolted upright from the couch, beaming at Niki when he spotted her in the doorway. “Hi Niki!”

Making her way into the room, the folds of her skirt swishing around her calves with every step, Niki waved at both brothers as she settled herself at the table across from Wilbur. “Hi guys. What are you both up to?”

“Wilbur’s being a bitch!” Tommy immediately declared.

Niki giggled while Wilbur rolled his eyes. “He’s being dramatic. I’m just trying to get him to practice-” he paused, glancing at the door to make sure no one was nearby, “well, you know.”

Her eyes widened in understanding. “Ah, I see. Why does that make Wilbur a bitch, Tommy?”

“Because I just wanted my epli and he wouldn’t hand it to me,” Tommy groaned, tossing the half-eaten fruit above his head. “This is cruel and unusual punishment for a child. He’s starving his own little brother for his amusement!”

“You had a giant stack of pancakes for breakfast this morning,” Wilbur argued.

“Yeah, but that was hours ago! I’m a growing boy, Wilbur. Need plenty of calories if I’m gonna be the king!”

Wilbur rolled his eyes again at his brother’s antics. “You’re ridiculous.”

“No, *you’re* ridiculous! And you’re ugly!”

“Excuse you! That’s a low blow,” Wilbur gasped, although he wasn’t actually offended by the jab.

Tommy rested his chin on top of the couch cushion, looking back at him with a shit-eating grin. “Just sayin’ the truth, man. Sorry if you’re too obsessed with your dumb face to hear it.”

Letting out a short laugh, Wilbur stayed still for a moment, staring down Tommy and letting him bask in a sense of false safety. Then, after a beat, he dove for the couch and Tommy screeched.

“Wait! I’m sorry-” Tommy was cut off when Wilbur grabbed him in a loose headlock, holding Tommy against his chest as tight as he could without hurting him. “Let go of me!” He yelled, kicking his legs out and trying to pry Wilbur’s arms off of him.

“Not until you take it back,” Wilbur said, laughing at Tommy’s pathetic attempts to break his grip.

“Never! Fuck you!” Tommy shouted, and Wilbur hissed when Tommy blindly smacked him in the face.

In retaliation, Wilbur smacked the top of his head, and Tommy gasped in a way that was definitely over-exaggerated for how hard he hit him.

“THAT HURT!” Tommy screeched, slapping Wilbur’s arm hard enough that Wilbur could feel the red mark it left behind. “You’re such a bitch you piece of shit ugly asswipe I’m gonna kill you-”

“Uh, Tommy?”

A new voice in the room startled both Wilbur and Tommy out of their fight, the two of them freezing as they looked up at the same time.

Standing in the doorway was a shorter boy with a mess of brown and blonde hair, the colors popping up in uneven chunks that he insisted was natural despite how strange it was. As soon as Tommy spotted the boy, he gasped in delight, shoving Wilbur away and scrambling to his feet.

“Tubbo!” Tommy cried out, practically jumping on his best friend and wrapping his arms around him. “Where have you been? I’ve been so *bored* today.”

“Unlike you, Mr. Crown Prince, I actually have a job I need to do,” Tubbo snorted, shoving Tommy back.

“Ooooo I’m Tubbo and I’m so busy and boring all the time,” Tommy teased, door a poor imitation of Tubbo’s voice. “What are you doing here then if you’re so busy with work?”

“Because you *are* my work right now,” Tubbo said, grabbing Tommy’s wrist and tugging him towards the door. “You’re twenty minutes late for your lessons.”

Oh. Wilbur probably should’ve checked the clock.

“But I don’t wanna do stupid maths problems with Foolish,” Tommy complained, dropping his head on Tubbo’s shoulder. “I don’t even know why I need to learn maths in the first place. Kings don’t do maths!”

“A king should be well-versed in a variety of subjects,” Wilbur reminded him. “Like languages, literature, history-“

“And maths too, I know,” Tommy said, cutting him off with a loud groan. “Y’know, I’d practice my Voice if I could use it on Foolish so I could make him do my problems for me.”

Wilbur and Niki both tensed at that.

“Tommy, you know you can’t-“

“Yeah, I know,” Tommy huffed. “I can’t let anyone know I’m learning how to use my Voice, believe me, I’m well-aware of that. I was just saying it’d give me a lot more motivation to practice.”

“Well, you can’t or else the Themis Ambassadors will get really pissed at you,” Tubbo said, pulling Tommy to the door. “Now c’mon, we gotta get going. I got other shit to do that’s more important than dragging you to your tutor.”

“But as my personal servant shouldn’t you make me your number one priority?”

“I will punch you.”

“That’s called assaultin’ a royal, big man. That’s not gonna be- OUCH!”

Wilbur snorted as the boy’s voices faded down the hall, knowing the incredulous look Tommy probably gave Tubbo when he hit him.

Turning his focus back to Niki, he saw she was still staring at the door, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“He’s really not taking this stuff seriously, is he?” Niki asked softly, a crease forming between her brows.

“He’s only fifteen,” Wilbur reasoned, ignoring the dread pooling in his gut.



Niki glanced back to him, her silver eyes glimmering with something far too knowing. “You weren’t like that when you were his age.”

And that was the truth of it, wasn’t it? When Wilbur was fifteen, he’d already dedicated himself to his studies and his practice of his Voice. He threw himself into learning everything he could about Eldingvegr’s history, its economy, its culture—everything he needed to know to be Tommy’s advisor.

“I’m glad he’s not like me,” Wilbur said after a moment. “I never got to complain about my classes, or goof around with my friends, or just be a normal fifteen year old. You know that.”

Something sad flashed through Niki’s eyes. “Yeah, I know, Wil. And don’t get me wrong, I’m glad Tommy gets to have more of a real childhood.” She paused, pointed nails tapping against the wood table. “I just worry about what kind of a leader he’ll be.”

Wilbur stiffened, because he also had the same worries, but didn’t like to put a voice to them.

“He’ll be fine. I know he will,” Wilbur reassured her, even though he wasn’t convinced of that himself.

Niki sighed and stretched out a hand between them, the silvery-pink scales on her palm glinting under the lights above their heads. Silently, Wilbur placed his hand in hers and she squeezed it gently, the thin webbing between her fingers soft against his non-webbed ones.

“You know what I’m going to say,” Niki told him, staring at their hands.

Wilbur kept his eyes on the table. “There’s no point in going over it again.”

“I know there’s no point. It just-” she paused, squeezing his hand harder this time. “It just frustrates me. Because I think even Tommy would agree that you would be a much better fit-”

“Niki,” Wilbur cut her off, pulling his hand out of hers. “I said there’s no point in going over it again. I’m never going to be king. I have no *birthright* to take the throne. I was always going to be an advisor, and I’ve accepted that.”

“But don’t you want more?” Niki asked, frowning at him.

Yes. Wilbur had to bite his tongue to keep the answer from spilling out of his mouth, because yes he wanted more. Of course he wanted more. He wanted to be more than the bastard prince. He wanted to be more than a mistake his mother made before she married Tommy’s father.

But that wasn’t the role he had been cast for in his life.

“It doesn’t matter,” Wilbur said instead. “When Tommy turns eighteen he’ll be crowned King, and I will be his advisor. He’ll be a good king, I’ll make sure of it.”

Although Niki didn’t seem pleased at this, she seemed to understand that he wanted to change the subject, and decided not to push it.

“Themis has been getting antsy lately,” Niki said after a few moments, pulling her hands back to her side of the table.

Now *that* caught Wilbur’s attention.

“How so?”

“I’m not sure. They’ve been asking for reports more often, and the ambassadors have been pulling me aside for more meetings on how the two of you are doing,” Niki admitted, dropping her voice despite the fact that they were the only two in the room. “I feel like there’s something more going on that they’re not telling me.”

“Like what?” Wilbur pushed, frowning at her. “Like they’re concerned about our alliance?”

“Possibly, but I don’t know why they would be worried about that changing. Our alliance has been secured ever since Tommy was born,” Niki said, fiddling with the cuffs of her blouse. “Have you noticed anything unusual with the King Regent?”

Leaning back in his chair, Wilbur thought over his past few interactions with Eret. “They haven’t seemed to be acting unusual. Maybe more stressed, but that’s to be expected in the windy season.”

Humming, Niki nodded. “I’m probably just being paranoid.”

Wilbur’s frown deepened. “Don’t brush your instincts off like that. If Themis is acting strange, we need to keep an eye on them.”

“But it’s not like there’s anything we can do even if something odd is going on. The ambassadors only tell me limited information because they know I’m biased towards you and Tommy,” Niki said, huffing a bit. “Though I don’t know what else they expected. I’ve been here so long that I barely remember Themis. Sure, I’m an emissary for the planet in title, but Eldingvegr is more of my home than Themis has ever been.”

“At least you’ve been there,” Wilbur muttered. “I don’t think they’d let me and Tommy on the planet even if we wanted to travel there.”

Niki snorted. “Definitely not before Tommy is crowned. They might invite the two of you to the planet after his coronation to reaffirm the alliances, but I’m not sure about that.”

Talking about his mother’s home planet was always a strange experience because of how disconnected Wilbur felt from the place. Despite the fact that he’d lived there for the first few years of his life, he had been far too young to remember any of it. He might have been able to use the siren’s voice, but there was little else about him that would qualify him as a ‘siren’. But then again, if you were to ask anyone in the palace if he was Eldingvegrian, the answer would most likely be a resounding no.

He was just... Wilbur. A prince in title alone and nothing more.

“Keep an eye on the ambassadors and let me know if they do anything else unusual,” Wilbur said after a few moments, staring at his hands. “I’ll watch Eret, see if I notice anything off

with them.”

“I will,” Niki nodded, giving him a reassuring smile.

Suddenly, a soft dinging sound cut their conversation short. Pulling out a small, circular disc from his pocket, Wilbur set it on the table before tapping the top of it.

“Prince Orpheus, the King Regent requests your presence in the observatory,” an attendant’s voice said, echoing out from the small disc that was glowing a soft shade of blue.

Taking a breath, Wilbur nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

The disc went dark again, and Wilbur put it back in his pocket. Then, he pushed to his feet, ignoring Niki’s concerned look.

“Do you want me to come with?” She asked, also rising to stand.

“They probably want to speak to me in private, so I don’t think you can tag along,” Wilbur said, although he so badly wished he could bring Niki with him. It wasn’t that speaking with Eret was unpleasant. Wilbur had known them since he was a child after all. But having Niki by his side always made him feel more steady on his feet. Her presence kept his shoulders straight and head held high, because he knew she would tell him off if he were to shrink in on himself.

“I’ll go train then. Come find me afterwards,” Niki said, reaching out to squeeze his arm.

Wilbur gave her a grateful smile. “I’ll give you the full report on what they say.” It was said as a joke, but they both knew Wilbur would tell her everything no matter what.

With that, she dropped her hand, smoothed out the wrinkles in her pale blue skirt, and left the room. Now alone, Wilbur smoothed out his jacket, absently thumbing at the silver embroidery settled over his heart, before shaking himself off. He had a meeting to attend.

The clicking of his boots against marble echoed off the cavernous walls of the palace with every step. A few servants passed him, all dipping their heads in customary respect, but offering no greetings for him. Only when he was with Tommy did servants greet him as they passed by, and only because they had to greet Tommy first, so then it would seem odd for them to greet Prince Theseus and not Prince Orpheus.

It stopped stinging long ago.

Soon, Wilbur found himself stepping into the observatory. Enormous windows stretched from floor to ceiling, letting light bathe the room in varying shades of pink. In the center of the room stood the orrery—a model of the solar system Eldingvegr was located in. Gold and silver rods stretched out with models of the different planets settled on top, rotating slowly around a flickering orange replica of their sun. The metal glimmered in the dim light coming through the windows, and in front of the orrery, Wilbur spotted Eret.

“Wilbur,” they greeted, turning at the sound of his footsteps. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

Wilbur bowed his head at Eret, before stepping up to join them in front of the orrery. “I was told to come as soon as I could.”

“Oh, well I wish the attendant had specified it was nothing urgent. I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything,” Eret said, folding their hands in front of the billowing peach chiffon of their dress.

“You weren’t,” Wilbur replied quickly, keeping his eyes on the multi-colored model of Eldingvegr as it slowly moved in front of his gaze.

Eret hummed. “That’s good.”

Past the solar system model, Wilbur could see the barest pinpricks of stars twinkling against the purple-pink sky outside the windows. On the horizon, Wilbur could see the sky shifting from pink to something more akin to the same shade of peach as Eret’s dress, and knew that if he was facing the other way, he would see the horizon shifting to a darker shade of indigo.

“So, I was simply calling you in to ask for an update on how Tommy is progressing with his studies?” Eret asked after a few moments, shifting to face Wilbur fully.

Wilbur frowned, looking at Eret and meeting their pure white eyes. “Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to ask his tutors that? Especially considering his primary tutor is an old friend of yours?”

“I’ve spoken to his tutors. But I also wanted to get your perspective on how he’s progressing.”

“Oh.” Wilbur blinked, still confused as to why Eret would want his opinion on this, but figured it wasn’t worth questioning. “He’s progressing fine, I think. He’s still young, so he’s not always the most diligent, but I’m sure that’ll improve as the years go on.”

Eret nodded, and for the briefest of seconds, Wilbur thought he saw a frown flash across their face. But it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared, their features smoothed back out with that eternal youth of theirs Wilbur still struggled to understand.

If a stranger were to try and guess how old Eret was, they would probably say they were somewhere in their early adulthood—mid twenties by human standards. But Wilbur had known Eret since he was a very young child, and they had always looked that way. Although Eret’s true age was unknown, most of the rumors estimated them to be somewhere in the ballpark of one hundred and fifty years old.

“I’m glad you think so. I know some of his tutors are worried about his tendency for insolence,” Eret said, chuckling lightly. “Foolish isn’t worried though. In fact, I think he gets Tommy off topic during their lessons more than Tommy himself does.”

“I’m sure if Foolish taught him literally any other subject besides maths, then Tommy would never be late to his lessons,” Wilbur huffed, a small smile crossing his face.

Eret nodded. "I certainly think that would be the case." They paused for a moment, turning away from Wilbur and back to the orrery. "How are you holding up personally, Wilbur?"

"Me?" Eret nodded again, and Wilbur furrowed his brows. "Um, I'm alright. My lessons are rather minimal these days, but I like to believe I'm progressing well with learning about our trade agreements and alliances."

"What have you been learning about most recently?" Eret asked.

"I've been told to brush up on the current imperial powers that pose potential threats to us. I've been familiarizing myself with both the Antarctic Empire and the Essempi Empire, although it's far more difficult to find information on the Antarctic Empire than you would expect."

"I would imagine that's because the Antarctic Empire is so young."

Wilbur nodded. "Yeah, that's what I've been gathering. The Essempi Empire is still relatively young as well, but the Antarctic is far more closed off than Essempi is."

"Essempi is young, but very powerful," Eret said, a strange tightness to their voice that Wilbur couldn't understand the meaning of. "What do you know of it so far?"

"I know that it's currently being ruled by Emperor Dream XD III, and that he only took up the throne a few years ago when his father passed. I know that he has already taken far more planets than his father or grandfather did this early into their reigns, and I also know that he's said to be known to play dirty to get what he wants."

Eret's brows pinched. "Yes, that's what I've heard about him as well."

Glancing at the King Regent, Wilbur noted the tension lining their shoulders. "Dream hasn't made any threats towards us, has he?"

Immediately, Eret shook their head. "No, of course not. Dream's no fool, and he knows better than to get on Eldingvegr's bad side."

"Even a man as powerful as Dream has to rely on us for blaziphane," Wilbur muttered, snorting a bit.

"Blaziphane was the only reason his father was able to live for as long as he did, and I'm sure Dream intends to outlive him by many more years," Eret agreed, muscles twitching in their jaw. "Don't worry yourself too much about Dream, or about Essempi in general right now. You still have a few years before you need to be perfectly up to date on all of that."

"You called me in here because you were worried about Tommy's studying when he still has several years-"

"You and Tommy have very different roles in store for you, you know this," Eret said, cutting him off. "Besides, you've always been diligent in your studies, even when you were Tommy's age. You deserve to relax sometimes, especially since you're so young."

Wilbur huffed. "I'm an adult."

"You're nineteen. That's hardly an adult," Eret teased, flashing him a warm smile.

It certainly didn't feel like Wilbur was anything less than an adult. Like he'd said to Niki, he never felt like he'd actually gotten to have a real childhood. Wilbur was never a child of Eldingvegr like Tommy was. He was the bastard prince, the boy who technically had no right to stay on the planet after his mother had died. But he was still the brother of the future king, which meant enough to let him stay in the palace and retain his title as prince. But he was hyper aware at all times of how unwelcome he was. He didn't have the leeway to cause problems, to be insolent. This planet was the only home he'd ever known, and yet he was always going to be a guest on it.

Still, he wasn't going to complain about any of that to Eret. They were one of the few people who didn't treat Wilbur like an unwelcome guest in the palace, so at least there was that.

"I suppose," Wilbur acquiesced after a few moments.

Humming, Eret pushed their dark, curly hair out of their eyes, before their smile faded.

"Have you been holding up alright?" They asked in a much softer voice this time. "I know the windy season can be difficult for you."

Tensing, Wilbur's eyes flickered to the windows once more. A tree near the window trembled in the powerful wind gusts that were blowing past the palace, and if he pressed his ear to the glass, he knew he would be able to hear the near deafening howl of the wind as well.

*A ship taking off into the sky.*

*A loud screech as the wing of the shuttle is ripped off entirely.*

*Panic filling every fiber of his being as he watches the shuttle careen to the side, disappearing into the horizon.*

*His own screams being drowned out by the screaming wind-*

Shaking himself out of the memory, Wilbur shoved down the buzzing in his chest and forced his attention back to Eret.

"It's been fine. Just trying not to focus on it," Wilbur explained, coughing to clear his throat.

Eret made a sympathetic noise, and reached out to pat his shoulder. "Let me know if you need anything, Wilbur. As your parent's advisor, obviously it has been my duty to ensure the planet continued to thrive after their... accident, but I also like to think my duty has always included ensuring both you and Tommy are safe and whole as well."

Wilbur flashed them a grateful smile. "I know, Eret. You've been wonderful to us."

Although he wasn't sure why, Wilbur could've sworn something horribly sad flashed over Eret's face at this.



During dinner that evening, Eret's sadness didn't seem to let up.

Because of the windy season, there were no ships coming to and from Eldingvegr, meaning there were no dinners planned to host diplomats and ambassadors. Instead, dinner was a quiet affair, with only a few people present.

It was Wilbur, Tommy, Eret, Niki, and Foolish. The first time Eret had invited their old friend to join in on their private dinners, Wilbur had been confused. But even though Wilbur had never been tutored by Foolish like Tommy was, he got along with the man quite well. He was similar to Eret in that he didn't seem to think any less of Wilbur, but that might also have been due to the fact that Foolish wasn't from Eldingvegr either.

Foolish didn't speak much of where he came from. Wilbur only knew that he and Eret had met a very long time ago, and that Foolish had been traveling between planets for a while before Eret invited him to Eldingvegr.

Right now, Foolish and Eret were speaking in low voices over their food at the head of the table. Niki was sitting on one side of Wilbur, while Tommy sat on the other.

"Did you ever have to learn how to do something called a 'logarithmic function', Wilbur?" Tommy asked, frowning at him with a fork halfway to his mouth.

Wilbur frowned. "Uh, I believe so? But it was a while ago, so I couldn't tell you what they actually do."

Tommy groaned, taking an exaggerated bite of his food. "I was gonna ask if you could help me on my homework but I guess you're useless."

"Tommy, helping you on your homework usually means you trying to get me to do the problems for you," Wilbur huffed, elbowing his brother.

"Excuse me, that's called cheating which is something I would *never* do," Tommy shot back, scowling at him.

"Oh yeah, definitely not," Wilbur teased. "You've definitely never begged me to write an essay for you before."

Of course this was when Foolish decided to chime into the conversation. "Huh? Cheating?"

Face going bright red, Tommy let out a nervous laugh and quickly shook his head. "What? I wasn't talking about cheating, that was Wilbur! He's such a wrong'en, trying to convince me to cheat on my homework-"

"You are such a little liar!" Wilbur exclaimed, punching Tommy in the arm.

"Ow! I'm not a liar, you're a bad influence!"

"I'm telling you not to cheat, you brat!"

“And I was just asking for help-”

“Boys,” Eret cut in, pinching the bridge of their nose. “No bickering at the dinner table. We’ve talked about this before.”

Huffing, Tommy slumped back in his seat. “Fine.”

From his angle, Wilbur could see Tommy holding a hand up under the table, and when he glanced down he realized Tommy was flipping him off.

He shot Tommy a dirty look, and when Eret turned back to their food, he punched Tommy in the arm again. Tommy yelped while Wilbur smoothed out his face to the picture of innocence, ignoring the suspicious look Eret shot his way while trying not to snicker. On his left, Niki just seemed exasperated, which he also expertly ignored.

“So,” Eret suddenly said, startling Wilbur and Tommy both to attention, “the wind is going to die down tonight it seems, though it’ll only be a few hours before it picks up again.”

“Are we going to try and get any ships off planet during the window?” Wilbur asked, straightening up in his seat.

Eret nodded. “We’ll see if we can send off a shipment of blaziphane that we collected before the season began, but weren’t able to process in time. If the window isn’t long enough though it’s not a problem. The shipment can stay here till the season ends.”

“Why are we taking the risk though?” Tommy jumped in, surprising Wilbur.

Mirroring Wilbur’s surprise, Eret blinked a few times. “What do you mean?”

“I mean if the blaziphane can stay till the season ends, why are we even bothering trying to ship it off during the window? We know the predictions aren’t always accurate, and if the ship takes off and is still in the atmosphere when the winds pick up again-”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Eret reassured him. “If it seems like the winds might pick up again before the ship can get out of the atmosphere, then we won’t launch it. And again, it’s not necessary, but we were supposed to send out a shipment to Themis before the windy season picked up, so it’s already late.”

“Themis has plenty of blaziphane from us though. I don’t think it’s worth risking an entire fuckin’ ship instead of just making them wait a few more weeks,” Tommy scoffed, frowning now.

“Themis is our most closely allied planet,” Wilbur pointed out, Niki’s words from earlier about the ambassador’s strange behavior echoing in his mind. “If the risk is low enough, it’s better to try and get the shipment to them as quickly as possible.”

“Especially considering how Queen Myrina’s doing,” Foolish added. “She’s been sick for a while, so they’re pretty antsy about getting their hands on more blaziphane.”

Niki and Wilbur both frowned at this.



“Lord Foolish, what do you mean that Queen Myrina is sick?” Niki asked, tightening her grip on her fork.

Foolish’s eyes widened, and he glanced at Eret who was sighing into their hand.

“Oh, uh, I thought you guys would’ve known about that,” Foolish said, chuckling awkwardly. “Um, can we pretend I didn’t say that?”

“Why wasn’t I informed of this?” Niki pushed, ignoring Foolish’s request. “I’m an Emissary of Themis, why wouldn’t I be told if the Queen was ill?”

“Lady Nihachu, you know we have no control over what the Ambassadors do and don’t tell you,” Eret reminded her, a quiet warning underlying their words. “You’ll have to take that up with them, not us.”

“Then why wasn’t I informed of this?” Wilbur jumped in, frowning at Eret. “I’m supposed to be kept up to date on exactly this kind of stuff.”

“Again, the Ambassadors control most of the information we receive from Themis. I assumed if they wanted you to be aware of it, they would’ve told you,” Eret explained. “If you want any more information on it, you’ll have to go to them. As you all are aware, Themis likes to keep their political affairs private.”

“But why keep it from us?” Tommy asked, still frowning. “Our mum was literally part of the Themis Royal Family. Queen Myrina is related to us, right?”

“She’s your aunt,” Niki murmured.

Tommy nodded at that. “Exactly! Don’t we have a right to know if our aunt is sick?”

“It’s more complicated than that, unfortunately,” Eret said, folding their hands in front of them. “Yes, you are related to Queen Myrina by blood, but the sirens don’t consider either of you to be proper sirens. Neither of you were raised on Themis, moreover you’re both only half siren rather than full siren. Not to mention, you’re both male, and the Themisian line of succession defaults to the women first.”

Wilbur knew that. Of course he knew the sirens didn’t give a shit about him and Tommy, but he was surprised that Tommy hadn’t seemed to realize that until now.

Swallowing down a lump in his throat, Tommy’s eyes fell to his plate. “Oh. I see.”

“You’ll understand it a bit more when you’re older,” Foolish reassured him, trying to give Tommy a kind smile. “It’s not, like, a personal thing against you. The sirens are kinda just like that.” Pausing, Foolish glanced at Niki. “No offense, Lady Nihachu.”

“None taken, Lord Foolish,” Niki muttered, twisting her fingers into the napkin in her lap.

An awkward silence fell over the table after that. Foolish went back to eating, pointedly not looking at anything but his food. Wilbur could tell that Niki was angry, with the way she was eating her dinner just a bit too quickly, and how her eyes were glowing a bit brighter than

they usually did, but she was doing her best to hide it. Tommy had gone oddly quiet, with his brows furrowed as he picked at his food without the same interest he had in it before.

Eret, meanwhile, had that sad look on their face again. Wilbur caught their eye several times, and realized that they were staring at both him and Tommy. It made him squirm in his seat to feel their empty white eyes on him, and he wondered what could be going through their head.

It wasn't long before Tommy excused himself from the table, and Wilbur found he wasn't very hungry anymore either, so he did the same. Niki, unsurprisingly, followed suit, so the three found themselves walking away from the dining hall and to their rooms.

"I just don't get it," Tommy muttered as they turned down the hall to the residential wing of the palace. "I thought the sirens were allied with us because of me."

"They are," Niki told him. "You're part of the Royal bloodline for both Themis and Eldingvegr, so you're at the crux of the alliance they have. But just because you have siren blood doesn't mean they actually consider you a siren."

Tommy sighed. "Guess that makes sense. Still feels weird."

They stopped walking when they reached the door to Tommy's room, and subsequently Wilbur's, since their rooms were right next to each other.

"Are you two gonna go talk about secret shit in Wil's room?" Tommy asked, frowning at the two of them.

Wilbur snorted. Tommy knew their routine far too well.

"You're welcome to join us," Niki offered sweetly. "Though you'll probably be bored by our conversation."

Huffing, Tommy shook his head. "No thanks. I had enough political talk at dinner."

As he turned the doorknob to his room, Wilbur held out a hand.

"Come say goodnight to me before you go to sleep, gremlin," Wilbur reminded him, ruffling his brother's hair.

Tommy smacked his hand away with a pout. "I'm not a baby. I don't need you to tuck me in."

"Who said it was about you? Maybe I just wanna talk to my precious, adorable, tiny brot--"

"I will slit your throat in your sleep," Tommy deadpanned.

Wilbur chuckled. "I'd like to see you try."

"That'll be my way of saying goodnight. I'm gonna go in there and kill your ass--"

Before Tommy could finish, Niki opened the door to Wilbur's room and dragged him inside, with Tommy glaring at him before the door shut once again.

Wilbur knew that despite his protests, Tommy would come say goodnight to him no matter what. Not only because it was their routine, but also because it was the windy season. Even if Tommy didn't say it out loud, Wilbur knew it bothered him more than he let on, just like it bothered Wilbur.

Right now though, Wilbur wasn't focusing on the wind howling outside his windows. Instead, he followed Niki to the center of his room, where his bed had been perfectly made up by the servants after the mess he'd left it as this morning.

Dropping his wrist, Niki tucked her skirt under her as she climbed up onto the bed, and Wilbur settled himself next to her. Immediately, the smile she'd had on for Tommy fell from her face.

"There's something weird going on," Niki said without preamble.

Wilbur nodded, his own grin fading as he thought back to that disaster of a dinner. "Yeah, no shit. I get why maybe me and Tommy wouldn't be told about Queen Myrina being sick, but for you not to be told is just-"

"It's not normal," Niki agreed, biting her lip. "I guess this makes sense as to why the Ambassadors were asking me for more information. If something happens to Queen Myrina, they'll want to ensure our alliance with Eldingvegr stays secured through the transfer of power."

"Who's next in line for the throne?" Wilbur asked, wringing his hands in his lap.

Niki furrowed her brows. "I believe Queen Myrina's first born daughter is, well, her name is Myrina too, but her second name is Hannah. She should be the one getting ready to inherit the throne."

"Do you know much about Hannah?"

"No, I don't. I'm sure she's been preparing her entire life to take the throne though, and I'm pretty sure she's either around our age or a few years older." She paused, narrowing her eyes. "I don't see why Hannah would want to dissolve our alliance, so it still doesn't make sense to me why the Ambassadors are acting so strangely about this whole thing."

Humming, Wilbur dragged his hands through his hair as he let out a quiet sigh. "I can't help but feel like there's something we're missing here. Eret's definitely acting off about something, but I can't tell if it's just the stress of the windy season or something more."

"What did you two talk about during your meeting?" Niki asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"They just wanted my opinion on how Tommy was progressing with his studies, and they also asked how my own studies were going," Wilbur told her, fiddling with the ends of his jacket. "On the surface there was nothing unusual about our conversation, but they just seemed sad about something."

"Sad?"

“I guess? Something was bothering them, I could tell that much.”

Humming, Niki absently poked at the thin webbing between her fingers. “It might just be the time of year. The windy season brings up bad memories for them just as it does for you and Tommy.”

Wilbur stared at her for a moment, noting how she was keeping her eyes on her lap. “Do you actually believe that?”

Hands going still, Niki let out a soft sigh and shook her head. “No. The timing of that with Queen Myrina is just... it’s too strange to ignore.” There was a beat of silence, the webbing points of her ear twitching like they always did when she was thinking deeply about something. “I fucking hate this, you know?”

“Hate what?” Wilbur questioned.

“Being left out of these discussions. Having all these politics go over our heads like no one trusts us. I’ve spent my entire life being told I’m here on behalf of Themis, but Themis clearly doesn’t trust me like they trust the Ambassadors, so it makes me wonder what I’m even supposed to do here.”

Wilbur couldn’t stop himself from scoffing at that. “Yeah, trust me, I know what that feels like.”

“I wasn’t trying to say you didn’t,” Niki clarified, glancing up to meet his eyes. “That’s the reason I’m telling you this. You’re the only one who gets it.”

All of Wilbur’s frustration faded as quickly as it appeared. Shoulders slumping, he leaned against Niki’s side, and she looped her arm through his. Outside the window, Wilbur could still hear the rushing of the wind, although it was quieter than it usually was.

“Do you remember when we were kids, and during the windy season you could never sleep, so we’d sit on your bed and try to sing loud enough to drown out the wind?” Niki asked after a minute of silence.

The memory made Wilbur smile. “And then if we sang too loudly, we’d wake up the staff, but because it was siren singing we’d just accidentally enchant them so they’d all be standing outside my room like they were sleepwalking?”

Niki snorted. “Yup. The Ambassadors were convinced I had a gift for singing because of that, not realizing half of that was your power too.”

“I remember that!” Wilbur laughed. “And then they kept asking you to sing at events and you’d have to make up excuses for why you couldn’t.”

“I told them I had stage fright,” Niki explained, grinning now. “One time I even made myself cry when they were trying to get me to perform for a banquet.”

“They never realized your gift was actually in acting rather than singing,” Wilbur huffed.

At this, Niki's smile faded. "They still have no idea how much I've lied to them. They know my loyalties lie with you and Tommy more than they lie with Themis, but I don't think they realize the extent."

"It's their own fault," Wilbur muttered, focusing on the warmth from Niki's side. "If they wanted you to be loyal to Themis, they should've given you more of a reason other than 'it's your duty'." A beat passed, and Wilbur straightened up to look at Niki directly. "Whatever's going on now with Themis and Eldingvegr, I want you to remember that you're with us, okay? Me and Tommy."

Niki nodded, giving him a grateful smile. "I know, Wil."

Another moment of silence hung between them. And then, Niki pulled herself away from Wilbur's side and pushed to her feet.

"I should go back to my room now," she said, straightening out her skirt. "I'll try to learn more about Queen Myrina from the Ambassadors tomorrow. Maybe you should try and do the same so we can see if they give us different information."

"That's a good idea," Wilbur agreed.

Outside the window, there was the sound of a loud *thud!*, and Niki glanced out to the pink and purple sky with a soft frown.

"Do you want me to make you sleep before I leave?" Niki offered, glancing back at him with worried eyes.

It was a tempting offer. Niki knew Wilbur always had trouble sleeping during the windy season, and this wouldn't have been the first time she used her Voice on him to make him sleep because there wouldn't be any way for him to sleep otherwise.

But still, Wilbur forced himself to shake his head. "No, I still need to say goodnight to Tommy."

Nodding in understanding, Niki flashed him another smile. "Alright then. But let me know if you change your mind."

Then, with one final wave, she left the room with the door clicking shut softly behind her.

Now alone, Wilbur let out the shaky breath he'd been holding ever since he spoke to Eret earlier that day. Things were so confusing right now. There was his worry about Tommy's future role as king, there were the strange things going on between Themis and Eldingvegr, there was Eret's peculiar sadness, and on top of it all the windy season was making him incredibly anxious.

There was an uncomfortable itch under his skin that he couldn't scratch. A twist in his gut that told him something was wrong. Something bigger was going on, and it wasn't going to be very long before Wilbur found out what it was.

At least he had Niki by his side to help him figure this out. Tommy was still too young to fully grasp the strange machinations that came with the Royal Courts and interplanetary politics. If Wilbur told him his worries, the kid would just think he was being paranoid for no reason.

Maybe Wilbur was being paranoid. But his gut told him he had plenty of reason to be.

Several minutes after Niki left, Wilbur forced himself to his feet to change into his pajamas. Leaving his delicately embroidered coat laying haphazardly over a chair, he tossed his boots to the side and ran his fingers through his hair to get rid of the last vestiges of gel the servants had put in it to tame his curls.

Once changed, he sat on the edge of his bed rubbing the lenses of his glasses with the edge of his shirt to try and get out the smudges. As he was doing this though, he was interrupted by a soft knocking on his door. Except it wasn't from the door Niki had left through. It was from the door that connected his and Tommy's rooms to each other.

"Wil?" Tommy called out from the other side. "You still awake?"

"Yeah, I'm here. You can come in," Wilbur replied.

The door was gently pushed open, revealing Tommy standing in the doorway already dressed in his pajamas. His own golden curls were sticking up in every direction, and even without his glasses on, Wilbur could see sleep tugging at the corners of his eyes.

"Are you going to bed?" Wilbur asked, settling his glasses back on the bridge of his nose.

Furrowing his brows, Tommy wrapped his arms around himself and shook his head. "I, um, was trying to sleep. But I actually wanted to ask if..." he hesitated, biting the inside of his cheek. "Can I sleep in your room tonight?"

Tommy's voice was so *small* compared to his loud teasing from earlier in the day. This was the version of Tommy that very few people saw. The version that was mostly reserved for Wilbur alone, and sometimes Niki, depending on the situation. Not the chaotic and loud-mouthed Crown Prince, but the boy who never wanted to admit his fear of the wind, the boy who was soft-spoken when asking for real favors from his brother, the sensitive kid who Wilbur had practically raised.

"Yeah, of course, bud. You know you can always come in here if you want," Wilbur said softly, pushing to his feet and padding over to the doorway. "It might be easier for us to sleep in your room though, just because your bed is a bit bigger than mine is."

"Okay then," Tommy nodded.

Resting a hand on Tommy's shoulder, Wilbur turned off the lights in his own room as they passed through the tiny passageway that connected their rooms. In Tommy's room, Wilbur could see the trees in the window had stopped shaking in the wind, which made sense since Eret said the wind was going to die down for a bit tonight.

The routine between them was well-established at this point. Wilbur stretched himself across Tommy's bed first, and then held his arms out for his little brother. Tommy dove under the blankets, squirming until his head was resting on Wilbur's chest, and Wilbur readjusted so his chin was on top of Tommy's head.

As the two were getting comfortable, there was a knock at the normal entrance to Tommy's room, and they both paused.

"Who is it?" Tommy called out.

"It's me, dipshit," Tubbo yelled back. "Can I come in?"

"You gotta call me Your Highness first!"

"Oh fuck you, man," Tubbo said, ignoring Tommy's request as he opened the door.

The servant boy paused when he spotted Wilbur, but only blinked once before shaking himself off. Different servants had found the two brothers sleeping in the same bed plenty of times before, so it wasn't anything surprising. If anything, it was almost odd that Tubbo did a double take at it, but Wilbur figured he was just surprised.

"What have you got for me, Tubsters?" Tommy asked, not bothering to lift his head off of Wilbur's chest.

Tubbo held up a tray that had a pristine glass of water settled on it, along with a small dish. "Sleeping pills. Eret told me to give them to both you and Wilbur tonight."

Wilbur furrowed his brows. "Why?"

"I dunno. They said they had a feeling you two might have trouble sleeping tonight," Tubbo shrugged, setting the tray down on Tommy's nightstand. It was then that Wilbur saw there were two dishes on the tray, each one with a singular white pill in the center of it.

Huh. Wilbur supposed that made sense considering the wind was supposed to die down tonight. Eret knew the two of them better than Wilbur gave them credit for, which meant they also knew it was almost more upsetting for both of them when the wind died down for a few hours compared to when it was howling constantly for days on end.

"Thanks," Tommy said, rolling over to press his face into Wilbur's shirt.

Tubbo frowned. "Aren't you going to take them?"

Tommy didn't look back at Tubbo. "I dunno, maybe? Wil and I are talking though so I'm not gonna take them right this second."

For some reason, Tubbo's frown deepened. "I mean, it takes a few minutes for them to kick in, so maybe just take them now--"

"Tubbo," Wilbur said, cutting the boy off. "We know how long it takes for them to kick in. Don't worry about us."

Tubbo's jaw clenched at this, and he stared at the two of them for a moment, like he wanted to argue.

After a few seconds though, he sighed and dropped his shoulders. "Fine. Just make sure to take them so you guys get some sleep."

With that, he turned to head back to the door. There was a certain hesitance in his steps though. Like he didn't want to leave, but knew he had no other choice.

He paused at the doorway. "Night guys," he called out softly.

"Night Tubbo," Wilbur waved.

"G'night Tubbitch," Tommy said, his voice muffled by Wilbur's shirt.

Wilbur didn't miss the way Tubbo squeezed his eyes shut at that, almost like he was trying to keep himself from flinching. But he didn't say anything more, and with one last look at the two of them, shut the door behind him.

The lights dimmed automatically, and Wilbur glanced out the window at the permanent twilight sky, the trees now standing almost perfectly still for the first time in weeks. There was no constant hum from the screaming wind, and it made something ache in Wilbur's chest.

"I don't wanna take the sleeping pills," Tommy mumbled into Wilbur's shirt. "They make me all groggy in the morning."

"Do you think you'll be able to sleep without them?" Wilbur asked, rubbing small circles into Tommy's shoulder.

"I will if you sing to me."

Wilbur snorted. "So that's why you wanted to sleep with me tonight. You just wanted to use me for my voice."

Surprisingly, instead of teasing him like he expected, Tommy softly said, "It's just too quiet when the wind dies down, and when you sing all the loud shit in my head just... goes away."

Warmth bloomed in Wilbur's chest at this, and he squeezed the arms he had around Tommy's shoulders just a bit tighter. "That would probably be because siren singing is known to calm people down and draw them in."

"No, I think it's just because you're a really good singer," Tommy huffed, his eyes fluttering shut.

Despite the unease that had made itself a home in Wilbur's chest and under his skin because of the lack of wind outside the window, he found himself smiling at Tommy's comment.

Holding onto the warmth Tommy's words had given him, Wilbur opened his mouth and began to sing.



The song Wilbur sang wasn't in Common. It was a song written in Old Themisian, one that sirens had sung as lullabies to children for hundreds of years. Wilbur had faint memories of his mother singing it to him when he was little, and when he found out that Tommy didn't have those same memories since he'd been so young when she died, he begged Niki to teach him all the words so he could sing it to Tommy in her place.

Because despite Tommy being the golden child of Eldingvegr, having the respect of the entire Royal Court and a bright future ahead of him as the king, Wilbur would always have one thing Tommy did not—memories of their mother. And that was the one thing Wilbur thought Tommy deserved more than anything.

So he did what he could. He tried to teach Tommy how to use his Voice, and he sang him the same lullabies their mother sang to him. Even though Tommy didn't talk about either of his parents often, Wilbur could tell he was grateful for the lullabies all the same.

Wilbur sang and sang and sang, watching the faint stars twinkle in the dusty pink sky outside the window. Slowly, Tommy's breathing evened out, and it wasn't long before there was light snoring rumbling against Wilbur's chest.

Once he finished the song, Wilbur tugged the blankets up a little further on Tommy's back. Even though the calming effect of a siren's singing didn't work on the singer themselves, Wilbur still found himself feeling far more relaxed than he had before.

Sinking back into the mattress, Wilbur's eyes fluttered shut. With Tommy's soft breathing echoing in his ears, he felt himself drift off to sleep.



The sound of an explosion woke Wilbur up.

Bolting upright in the bed, Tommy yelped at the sudden movement.

“What the fuck, Wilbur?!” He yelled, grabbing his nose where Wilbur had accidentally hit it.

Wilbur didn't respond to Tommy. His eyes were on the window, gaze searching for the source of the explosion. When he found what he was looking for, his heart dropped into his stomach.

“Oh my god,” Wilbur whispered, blood turning to ice in his veins.

“What? What's-” Tommy cut himself off when he spotted it as well. “Oh fuck.”

Not much had changed since Wilbur had fallen asleep. The sky was still pink, the stars were still barely visible, and the wind hadn't picked back up again.

But actually, the sky *had* changed. Because although the stars were barely visible, Wilbur could see the giant armada of battleships sitting in their sky as clear as day. And in case there was any doubt for what their intentions were, another missile shot out from one of the ships, causing the tree Wilbur had been staring at earlier to explode into a thousand different pieces.

They were under attack.

## Chapter End Notes

### FIRST CHAPTER DONE WOOHOO

again, not going to be updating this regularly until I finish the world forgetting by the world forgot, so make sure to subscribe so you get an email notif when I post the second chapter of this! after that, hopefully you'll be able to expect at least once a week updates from me with this (though I don't have a posting schedule so no promises).

we'll be seeing a lot more characters very soon so don't worry if your fav isn't here yet. there's so many characters in this, I'm sure they'll pop up at some point :)

**ALSO REMINDER AGAIN: this is not an au of dune.** the plot in the very beginning is similar to the events of dune, but everything after that is entirely my original storyline, and the worldbuilding is entirely original as well (the Voice in this fic is completely different than the Voice in Dune for example in terms of where it came from and how it works and all that)

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

and yes there is a playlist for this fic :) check it out [here](#)

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I really want feedback on this idea so far because I'm just so excited about it so please please tell me if you enjoyed!

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# the plundering of a home

## Chapter Summary

The invasion is in full swing.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone! I know I said I wasn't going to update this again until I finished world forgetting, but I only have the epilogue left to write for that so I figured I might as well go ahead and write chapter 2 of this :) plus, I just really really wanted to write more of this, I'm so excited for this to be my main project lol

thank you all so much for your kind comments on the first chapter! I really hope you guys enjoy this next chapter, it's got a LOT of action going on so it's a fun time <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Some say that when you see something you can't believe, time slows down. The world around you grows hazy as a constant ringing screams in your ears, and your vision tunnels in on the single thing you can't process.

That was what Wilbur was experiencing right then. He couldn't move. His limbs felt locked in place as he stared at the fleet in the sky, breath catching in his throat as hellfire rained down from the twilight sky and onto his planet.

His ears were ringing. Ringing ringing ringing- so loudly, that Wilbur didn't hear Tommy talking to him until his little brother's face filled his vision.

"Wilbur!" Tommy cried out, grabbing Wilbur's shoulders and shaking him. "Can you hear me?"

Wilbur blinked, jumping as he was forcibly thrust back into the reality of his situation. "Shit- yeah, fuck, sorry I'm here." Shaking himself off, Wilbur moved Tommy's hands off his shoulders and tucked his brother into his side. "We need- fuck, we need to find out where the guards are."

"Aren't they supposed to come in here and grab us if anything like this happens?" Tommy whispered.

Shit. Right. That was the protocol for emergency situations. If there was ever an attack, Tommy was the number one priority in the entire palace, with Eret being the second, and

Wilbur being third. Guards were supposed to be swarming to Tommy's room right now, bursting inside and rushing the two of them into the bunker under the palace.

Except Wilbur couldn't hear anything going on outside the doors. There were no pounding footsteps, and no guards shouting orders at one another.

The only thing Wilbur could hear were the muffled explosions coming from outside, and Tommy's ragged breathing against his chest.

"They might be on their way," Wilbur said, although it was a weak attempt at comfort. They both knew the guards should've been here already. It was supposed to take them two minutes or less to get to the Crown Prince in the event of an emergency, and yet it would've taken the ships at least three minutes to enter the atmosphere, let alone start firing on the surface of the planet.

There was something wrong here.

Suddenly, Wilbur thought back to the strange sadness Eret had been carrying all day. The invisible weight on their shoulders that Wilbur had just attributed to stress. The uneasy feeling he had that there was something *more* going on.

No. No Eret wouldn't- Eret couldn't have known about this, right?

Wilbur couldn't think that right now. Eret wouldn't betray them like that. That was impossible.

Betrayal or not, the first of the invading ships were landing, and it was only a matter of time before enemy soldiers flooded the palace. Wilbur's mind raced as he tried to go over all the lessons he'd been given for emergency situations like this. The overarching message in all of them was that if anything were to happen, Wilbur would have to protect Tommy until the guards came to get them both.

Wilbur had Tommy with him, so that was step one. But the guards weren't here. And they were running out of time.

"We need to find the guards," Wilbur finally said after far too long of a silence. His heart was pounding in his ears and he was struggling to take deep breaths, but he needed to make a decision. They couldn't just stay here like sitting ducks.

Forcing his stiff limbs off the bed, Wilbur tugged on Tommy's arm, and Tommy reluctantly followed him across the room. Wilbur's hand was gripping Tommy's so tightly, he was sure he had to be cutting off Tommy's circulation, but Tommy didn't breathe a single complaint. Instead, he just followed Wilbur like a shadow, his shoulders shaking as the two of them approached the door.

Wilbur pressed his ear against the door. He tried to listen for any sign of the guards outside, but didn't hear even a single set of footsteps walking down the hallway. That was wrong. There should've been dozens of people running back and forth in a panic. Yet there was nothing.

Using his free hand, Wilbur cracked open the door as quietly as possible. He peeked into the hallway, finding it as empty as he assumed it was. The only lights came from the pink sky outside the windows, and the explosions that lit up the walls in shades of orange.

“Is there anyone out there?” Tommy whispered behind him.

“No, there’s not,” Wilbur said, shaking his head. Opening the door a little wider, he pulled Tommy out into the hall, and tried to decide which way they should go.

One way led deeper into the residential wing, the other led back to the front of the palace. They were more likely to find guards in the front, but that was also likely where the invaders were going to come in first.

Plus, Niki’s room was further down the residential wing. Wilbur had to find her as soon as possible.

“This way,” Wilbur told Tommy, keeping their fingers tightly interlaced as he started down the hall. Tommy followed with silent footsteps, neither one of them having bothered to grab shoes in their panic.

Cold seeped through the thin fabric of Wilbur’s socks through the stone beneath his feet. They passed by another large set of floor to ceiling windows, both boys ducking instinctively despite the fact that the ships outside were way too far to see inside the palace.

The explosions had died down, but Wilbur could hear fighting outside. That was his planet they were setting on fire. Smoke was already turning the purple-pink sky hazy, and Wilbur didn’t want to think about how many innocents were getting caught in the cross-fire of this battle.

They sprinted down the hallway, Wilbur’s heart pounding in his ears. He spun around another corner to the next set of bedrooms, and stopped running so quickly that Tommy slammed into his back.

Soldiers were standing at the end of the hallway. Not soldiers of Eldingvegr. If they were soldiers of Eldingvegr, they’d be donning silver and white uniforms. But these soldiers were instead clad in shimmering black fabric, decorated with hints of painfully bright green.

A rock dropped into Wilbur’s gut as he shoved Tommy behind him. The guards at the end of the hallway hadn’t seen the two of them yet, but they were heading straight towards them.

“Get back!” Wilbur whisper-shouted at Tommy, pushing him behind the corner wall. He spun around to run back the opposite direction, but froze when he saw another set of soldiers there.

Oh god. Oh fuck this was bad. This was really bad.

They were going to have to go either through one set of guards or the other. Wilbur took a shaky breath, wondering if he would be able to use his Voice on all of them.

Before he could decide which group would be easier to take on though, there was movement down the residential hallway.

*"DON'T MOVE!"* Niki's Voice echoed off the walls with a deafening roar, making every molecule in Wilbur's body shake. The order wasn't directed towards him, so he felt no compulsion to follow it, but it jarred him all the same as the soldiers froze midstep.

Niki had stumbled out of her room, her pink hair nearly glowing in the light of the explosions outside. She whipped her head around, and Wilbur dragged Tommy out from behind the wall, sprinting towards her as fast as he could.

"Niki!"

"Oh thank god!" She grabbed Wilbur's other hand, already yanking him back in the direction they came from. "Do you know what's going on?!"

"No, we don't. But the guards aren't here!" Wilbur explained, wincing as Niki's nails dug into his hand from how tightly she was holding it. "But we can't go that way," he added, pulling Niki back. "More soldiers are down there."

"Shit. This- This isn't right," Niki muttered, frowning as she glanced back at the soldiers she'd frozen in place.

"I know, but we need to try and get to the bunker."

Niki nodded. "The bunker. Yeah." Her voice was shaky, but her eyes narrowed into determined slits. "Okay. The bunker. Let's hurry before more soldiers show up."

The trio ran towards the frozen soldiers, and Niki stopped in front of them, forcing Wilbur and Tommy to stop as well.

*"Kill yourselves!"* She commanded, her Voice rushing through Wilbur with violent force.

Before Wilbur could process what Niki had just done, she was already pulling them away and past the guards.

*"Tommy, don't watch,"* Niki then added, directing her order only to Tommy as they ran.

Tommy's head snapped forward, and Wilbur shoved down the bile in his throat as he heard swords unsheath behind them.

Niki just killed three men. With no hesitation, she ordered those men to kill themselves. Wilbur knew that the sirens were said to be ruthless if they were forced to use their Voices, but Niki wasn't like that! She was *Niki*.

"Why the fuck did you do that?!" Wilbur demanded as Niki dragged them down another turn. "You- You didn't have to kill them!"

"I didn't have a choice," Niki snapped back.

"You did have a choice though! You could've just-"

Letting go of his hand, Niki whirled around and twisted her fingers into his shirt, yanking him down so they were nose to nose. "They're going to kill Tommy, Wilbur!"

Behind him, Tommy let out a startled sound. "What?!"

The words were like a slap in the face. "Wh- You don't know that!"

"Wilbur, this is a hostile takeover. They wouldn't send a full armada for anything but that," Niki said, letting go of Wilbur's shirt. "There's no way a hostile takeover would leave the Crown Prince alive."

Oh no. Niki was right. The soldiers were probably going to kill Tommy if they caught him.

Wilbur couldn't let that happen. He *wouldn't* let that happen.

"We have to keep moving," Niki said as Wilbur stumbled backwards, squeezing Tommy's fingers. She reached out her hand again, and stared at it for a moment.

Niki had just killed those soldiers. But they were going to kill Tommy.

This was life or death.

He took her hand, and they started running again.

They sprinted down the twisting hallways until they managed to stumble back in front of the dining hall. The trio slowed to a walk, with Niki letting go of Wilbur's hand and holding it out, telling him to hang back.

He waited, arm wrapped around Tommy's shoulders as they watched Niki approach the archway. Through it, Wilbur could see into the dining hall. The table had been cleared of the dinner they had eaten only a few hours before, the glittering chandelier lit up by the flames flickering outside the windows.

Niki's footsteps were silent as she stepped through the doorway.

Suddenly, a pair of hands appeared beside her, and she barely got a chance to scream before a gag was being tied over her mouth.

"MMMPH!" Niki tried to yell through her gag, but the arms dragged her fully into the dining hall.

Opening his mouth, Wilbur prepared to command the attacker to let her go, but suddenly Tommy was yelling, and next thing Wilbur knew a thick gag was being tied into his own mouth.

"Wilbur!" Tommy screamed, and Wilbur screamed back through the gag as Tommy's hand was ripped from his.

There were soldiers all around them now. Rough hands pinned Wilbur's arms behind his back. He bucked, throwing his head back as hard as he could, and yelped in pain when the

back of his skull hit something far more solid than a face. Some kind of metal helmet, if Wilbur had to guess.

In front of him, Tommy was being manhandled by another soldier, crying and screaming as they were both led into the dining hall. Despite their fighting, neither of the soldiers' grips faltered.

They were forced through the doorway. Niki was being dragged to the opposite side of the dining hall, kicking and screaming still behind her gag. Wilbur tried to yell for her, his voice muffled by the fabric in his mouth.

"Niki!" Tommy yelled, straining in the soldier's hold to try and get to her.

"Shut up, brat!" The soldier holding him snapped. Then, he looked up at the soldier holding Niki. "Take the siren back to her room and place a silencing barrier around it. The Emperor told us we are not to harm any Themisians."

"Understood!" The other soldier replied, before dragging Niki out of the dining room.

Wilbur tried to yell again past his gag, lurching forward to try and get to her. But the soldier holding him slapped the sore spot on his head, and Wilbur's legs crumpled as pain radiated through him.

Niki's eyes were wide and terrified, but then she was gone, and it was only Wilbur, Tommy, and the other soldiers left in the dining hall.

"Why aren't you supposed to hurt any Themisians, but you can hurt me and my brother?" Tommy demanded, narrowing his eyes at the soldier holding him.

"Because the Themisians don't consider you one of their own," the soldier huffed. "They know full well what our plans are for you, little prince."

There was a clear taunt in the soldier's tone, and even though his face was covered by his mask, Wilbur could tell he was smiling all the same.

"And what *are* your plans for us?" Tommy asked, his voice wavering.

The soldier snorted. "Take a wild guess."

Then, switching so he was only holding Tommy's arms with one hand, he brought the other hand up to his throat and mimed slitting his throat.

White hot fear rushed through Wilbur, and he struggled in the soldier's hold again. Meanwhile, all the color had drained out of Tommy's face, and he was staring at Wilbur with wide eyes.

"So what's the plan now?" The soldier holding Wilbur asked.

"We take Prince Theseus to meet the Emperor, because for some reason he wants to talk to the kid before he executes him," the other soldier explained.



“What about this one?” The soldier was referring to Wilbur, who was still fighting against his hold with little success. “The Emperor doesn’t give a shit about the bastard kid, right?”

*The bastard.*

“We were ordered to bring both of them to the Emperor alive, but I don’t see why he’s even bothering with him,” the other soldier said, gesturing to Wilbur. “It’s not like the kid is in line for the throne, but he has the siren Voice, and that makes him dangerous.”

Fuck. Wilbur had suspected they knew he could use his Voice since they gagged him, but to have it confirmed also confirmed that they really had been betrayed by someone in the palace. It wasn’t public information that Wilbur could use his Voice, only a handful of people were aware of that.

But Tommy hadn’t been gagged. Because the only people besides Wilbur and Tommy that knew Wilbur was teaching him how to use his siren Voice were Niki and Tubbo.

They didn’t know.

“Do you think we can just kill him and tell the Emperor that his gag slipped and we had no choice?” The soldier holding him asked.

Wilbur stiffened, while Tommy’s eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. He opened his mouth to say something, but paused, seeming to have the same realization Wilbur just did.

Shit. Tommy wasn’t ready. His Voice wasn’t nearly strong enough to compel these soldiers. If he tried then- then-

There was nothing Wilbur could do to stop Tommy as his eyes slipped shut. He couldn’t tell Tommy not to because he was gagged, but his heart was thundering in his chest like a jackhammer.

Wilbur watched Tommy do the breathing exercises, not even listening to the soldiers anymore as they debated whether or not to kill him. He breathed in for four seconds, and out for eight, repeating it several times over. The soldiers were still bickering, and didn’t notice the way Wilbur’s breathing hitched as Tommy’s eyes fluttered open.

“Remove his gag,” Tommy ordered, although his voice didn’t echo with any kind of power.

The soldier holding him stopped talking, reaching a hand into Tommy’s hair and yanking his head back. “What did you just say, brat?”

Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. He fucked up. Shit. This was it. Wilbur was going to get killed and Tommy was going to be all alone when he saw the Emperor and then he’d be killed and just-

*“REMOVE HIS GAG!”* Tommy screamed, and Wilbur was jolted by the voices echoing through every part of his body.

Immediately, the gag tied around his mouth fell to his chin.

*"Let us go!"* Wilbur shouted at both the soldiers.

Both the soldiers stiffened, as if they were puppets being strung up by their masters. The hands holding Wilbur fell, and Wilbur stumbled forward at the same time Tommy did.

*"Knock each other unconscious,"* Wilbur commanded as soon as he got his footing.

Neither of the soldiers were able to resist as they stepped towards each other, holding their swords with the ends facing out. With almost comedic timing, the two slammed each other in the sides of the head, both falling to the ground completely limp.

Holy shit. That had worked.

Tommy had used his Voice.

"That- That was really good, but we need to go," Wilbur stammered, grabbing Tommy's hand and tugging him out of the dining hall.

"Where are we going?" Tommy asked, sounding a bit hoarse after such a grand display of his siren Voice.

"We need to get to the bunker," Wilbur told him, darting back down the hall in the direction of the bunker. "Hopefully the guards are already hiding out there. I don't know why they wouldn't be trying to find us but-"

"Look out!" Tommy yanked Wilbur back in the opposite direction, making him stumble over his feet. Glancing back the way they were running, Wilbur could see more soldiers sprinting down the hallway, and he and Tommy immediately veered back the way they had come.

They kept running. And running, running, running. Wilbur's lungs were aching, his muscles screamed as he kept twisting down different hallways with Tommy in tow. They had to keep turning around when more soldiers appeared, and Wilbur wondered how they kept running into so many foreign soldiers, but not a single Eldingvegr guard.

The bunker was practically on the other side of the palace from where they were when they finally were able to stop and catch their breath. Tommy practically collapsed against the wall, gasping for air while Wilbur wasn't much better off. He kept whipping his head from side to side, just waiting for another flash of black and green.

"I don't think we can get to the bunker," Wilbur said after he caught his breath.

"Yeah, no shit," Tommy shot back, hunched over with his hands on his knees. "Is there anywhere else we can go?"

*Fuck.* Where else could they go? They were still on the residential side of the palace, but obviously their rooms were out of the question. There were dozens of guest rooms they could hide in, but those would buy them only a few hours at most.

Suddenly, a light bulb went off in his head, and he realized where they could go.

“Our old playroom isn’t far from here,” Wilbur told Tommy, looking down the left hallway.

Tommy furrowed his brows. “Our playroom? Why-” he cut himself off as his eyes widened with realization. “Oh. Holy shit.”

Wilbur nodded at his brother, a borderline manic smile spreading over his face. “It’s not a perfect solution, but it’s the best hiding spot we have.”

Straightening up, Tommy set his mouth in a determined line and held his hand out to Wilbur. “Let’s hurry the fuck up then.”

Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur swallowed his fear and grabbed Tommy’s hand again. “You ready to run?”

Tommy nodded, and they were off.

They sprinted down the left hallway, making a sharp right and another left as they headed towards the nursery side of the residential wing. The last time Wilbur and Tommy had been down this way, Tommy couldn’t have been older than eight. It had been so many years, Wilbur had almost forgotten about the very thing that might save their lives tonight.

But he didn’t forget, and neither did Tommy. Hopefully, they were the only ones.

Turning down another hall, Wilbur gasped when he saw more soldiers. They were facing away from them, so Wilbur held a finger up to shush Tommy, and the two ran silently across the cool stone floors, keeping their heads ducked as they hurried to the double doors that were closed to the hall.

His heart pounded in his chest as he used his free hand to try the door handle, nearly collapsing in relief when it wasn’t locked. He shoved Tommy inside first, making sure to shut the door as quietly as possible when he followed behind.

The playroom seemed as though it hadn’t seen a living soul inside of it since Tommy had last been in there. That wasn’t true, because when they held balls and allowed the nobles to come inside the palace, the nursery wing became a sort of daycare for any young children that had been brought along. Yet somehow, nothing seemed to be out of place compared to how it looked in Wilbur’s memories.

The plush, dark blue rug was soft under his feet, stretching across almost the entire length of the room over the stone. Crystalline shelves were lined with familiar toys that made something like nostalgia tug in Wilbur’s chest—colorful dolls, glittering bouncy balls, holo-projectors sat collecting dust along the walls. The wall opposite the double doors was entirely made of glass, and Wilbur’s throat almost closed up when he glanced outside and saw that the normally pink-purple twilight sky had turned red from the fires burning on the surface.

“This- This can’t be- Why aren’t we fighting back?” Tommy whispered, his voice thick as he stared out the window.

Wilbur didn't know. They should've been fighting back against the armada. There was no reason for them not to be. But he didn't see a single Eldingvegr jet fighter fly through the hazy sky. He didn't hear the familiar yells of Eldingvegr soldiers or palace guards. It was just... a takeover with no resistance. Like they had given up before the fleet of ships had even entered the atmosphere.

Before Wilbur could tell Tommy that, he heard footsteps outside the door. Both of them jumped, and Wilbur remembered that they weren't safe yet. Running to one side of the room, Wilbur knelt down in front of a silver toy chest, and placed his hands on the side of it. Tommy was by his side immediately, and the two shared a single look, listening to the footsteps growing louder by the second. Then, they began to push.

The toy chest was nowhere near as heavy as Wilbur remembered it being, which he figured was because he had been far weaker as an eleven year old than he was at nineteen. Still, they had to be as silent as possible, so they went slow with the pushing, trying to ignore the pounding footsteps getting closer and closer with every second. Soon enough though, their salvation was revealed.

After the death of their mother and Tommy's father, Wilbur and Tommy had been given a lot of free reign around the palace. Tommy was too young for lessons, and no one really cared what Wilbur did as long as he was keeping an eye on Tommy, so the two had been free to explore the palace to their heart's content.

It was this freedom that led to the discovery of a crawl space hidden in their playroom.

*"Wilby! I found something!" Tommy called out one day, his pudgy baby fingers poking at the boards on the wall.*

*At six years old, Tommy was already a master at getting himself into trouble, so hearing that he found something was never a good sign. Earlier, Wilbur had kicked the toy chest until it moved closer to the chair, so he didn't have to get up to grab a plushy when he wanted to throw one at Tommy's head.*

*He hadn't bothered to look at what was behind the chest, but apparently Tommy had.*

*"Did you actually find something or is it just a booger you're gonna try and shove in my face again?" Wilbur groaned, putting his book down on his lap.*

*"Nope, not a booger," Tommy giggled. "I think the wall is broken!"*

*Huh?*

*Furrowing his brows, Wilbur got out of his chair and got down on the ground next to Tommy. The walls of the playroom were made out of silvery wooden planks, coming from the natural sylfrwood trees that dotted the landscape of the palace—and pretty much anywhere inside the Røkkrring as well.*

*The wood itself wasn't unusual. But there was one board in particular that Tommy was poking, and Wilbur could see that it had come loose.*

*Normally, this would be something Wilbur would immediately tell a servant about so they could fix it. But there was something about the board that had Wilbur hesitating. There was a darkness that sat behind the board, and the more it wiggled, the more Wilbur's curiosity about what the darkness held grew.*

*Reaching up for the board, Wilbur began to pull on the edges of it. The piece of wood came loose with little resistance, and soon Wilbur found himself staring into a black void.*

*"Can you get me a torch, Tommy?" Wilbur asked, holding out a hand.*

*Tommy got to his feet, running to the opposite side of the room and digging under the toys tossed around until he found the light. The cool metal rod was dropped into Wilbur's palm, and Tommy pressed himself right up against Wilbur's side as he clicked it on.*

*"What's in there?" Tommy whispered, his large eyes almost comically wide.*

*The torch only shone a small beam into the space, but it was enough for Wilbur to realize that he was looking at some accident of architectural design. A tiny room that wasn't meant to exist, but did all the same.*

*"Whoa."*

*"What is it?" Tommy asked, poking his arm. "Tell me!"*

*Grinning, Wilbur put the torch down and began to pry at the next board beneath the one they pulled out. "I think we just found our new secret hideout."*

The hole in the wall was still there. It was far smaller than Wilbur remembered it being, but they would have to figure out a way to squeeze both of them through it.

There was no torch for them to peer inside the darkness now. Wilbur just had to trust that the darkness held the same secret space as it had nearly a decade before.

"You go in first," Wilbur said, nudging Tommy's shoulder.

"Am I even gonna fit through that?" Tommy asked, frowning as he stared at the hole.

The footsteps were right outside the door now. If they opened the doors, they were doomed.

"You're gonna have to, now go!"

Clenching his jaw, Tommy guided his arms through, and grunted a bit as he maneuvered himself into the crawlspace. Wilbur was struggling to breathe as he heard soldiers talking right on the other side of the door, some angry yelling telling him that they'd figured out that no one knew where the princes were.

After a few agonizing seconds, Tommy's feet disappeared into the darkness.

"Fuck, man! This is small!"

“Just press yourself into the wall as much as you can. I’m gonna crawl in now,” Wilbur told him.

The yelling got louder.

Wilbur shoved his arms through, his hands finding purchase against icy stone that sent a shock up his limbs. Then, he ducked his head through, wincing when the sore spot on his skull brushed the top. His shoulders were a fight to squeeze in, but with some wiggling he made it work.

Once his feet were inside, he twisted himself around, hissing in pain when he slammed between the two walls. The door handle to the playroom jiggled.

Reaching his arms back out, he grabbed the toy chest, groaning as he pulled it back in front of the hole. Right as he heard the click of the door open, darkness engulfed the crawlspace, and he practically collapsed back onto the ground.

“Wil-”

In the darkness, Wilbur was easily able to make out the glow of Tommy’s freckles on his cheeks, so he was able to slap a hand over his mouth before he got more than a tiny sound out. Pressing himself against the wall, Wilbur held Tommy against his chest, keeping his hand in place on Tommy’s face as they both listened to the soldiers dig through the room.

“I don’t think they’re in here,” one soldier said, sounding horrifyingly close to the toy chest.

“Yeah, there’s nowhere for them to hide,” another agreed, her words followed by something heavy slamming on the floor. “I could’ve sworn I saw them run in here, but I guess I was wrong.”

They must’ve been ransacking the room. Wilbur could picture the soldiers tossing the old toys onto the floor, smashing projectors and tossing baby blankets onto the ground without care. It was such a stupid thing for him to get upset about, but imagining it made tears spring to his eyes, and he had to force them down as he moved his hand away from Tommy’s mouth, instead shifting them both around so Wilbur was closest to the hole, and Tommy was pressed between Wilbur and the wall.

The crawlspace was so much smaller than he remembered it being. There was barely enough room for him to stretch out his legs, let alone have the both of them inside of it. Tommy was pressed against his back, his pounding heart thumping against Wilbur’s spine.

When there was the sound of more walking near the entrance to the crawlspace, Tommy made a fearful noise, and Wilbur felt thin arms wrap around his waist in a hug so tight, it was nearly painful.

“Has this room been cleared?” A new voice asked.

“Yes sir, the princes are not here,” the soldier replied, sounding far more formal than she had a few seconds before.

“Shit, alright. Go do another sweep by the dining hall.”

“Understood, General.”

Footsteps faded away, and Wilbur held his breath as Tommy shivered against his back.

There were a few moments of silence, and Wilbur wondered if all the soldiers had left. But then he heard the toy chest creak, and judging by the outlined shadow cutting through the slits between the wooden boards, the General was sitting on top of the toy chest.

“This is fucking stupid,” the General muttered, seemingly to himself. “How hard can it be to find two princes?”

Wilbur jumped when he heard the door open again. The General seemed to startle too, practically leaping to his feet to greet whoever had entered.

“Oh, uh, Your Majesty, I wasn’t aware you had entered-”

“Sapnap, you don’t need to pull the formal shit around the King here,” a new voice said, and Wilbur stiffened at the mention of Eret.

“Thank fuck,” the General—Sapnap apparently—huffed. “Well, either way, I didn’t know you had touched down yet. We’re still in the process of securing the palace.”

“I’m aware. The palace guards have already handed over their weapons, and the staff are currently being counted according to Eret, isn’t that right?”

It was like a slap in the face when Wilbur heard Eret’s deep timbre calmly respond with, “Yes, Dream. The guards were informed of this beforehand, so no resistance is to be expected.”

*Dream.* As in, Emperor Dream XD III of the Essempi Empire. That’s who was invading them. That’s who Eret was reassuring, as if they were old friends.

Wilbur felt like he was going to be sick.

Dream hummed like he was pleased. “So our only issue now is finding Theseus and Orpheus, correct?”

“Yes, that’s our number one priority right now,” Sapnap replied. “According to the soldier that secured the Emissary from Themis, two other soldiers had secured the princes in the dining hall. But in the dining hall we found those two soldiers unconscious on the ground, along with a discarded gag.”

“Orpheus must’ve gotten his gag off somehow,” Dream muttered, not sounding pleased whatsoever. “I thought you said his control of his Voice was poor?”

“To my knowledge, it was. But I suppose in desperate situations, he might be able to use it more than he normally could,” Eret explained. “He’s still only a half-siren though, and a male

at that. Even with adrenaline, I doubt he can do much with his Voice. The Emissary on the other hand-

“A silencing barrier has been put up around her room, so she’s not a concern at the moment,” Sapnap cut in.

“Very good. Hopefully once the palace is secured we can bring the Ambassadors back and they can return her to Themis,” Dream said, and Wilbur grit his teeth imagining Niki being sent back to Themis with the Ambassadors, without having any clue whether he and Tommy were alive or dead. “Until then, your number one priority is to find the princes, Sapnap. Especially Theseus.”

“Understood, Dream.” Something made a loud pinging noise, and there was a brief pause. “George says he’s secured the airspace but the winds are starting to pick up again. Should I tell him to have all the ships land now?”

“Yes, we don’t need any unnecessary accidents.”

“Alright. Message me if you need me.”

And with that, Wilbur listened as Sapnap left the room, the door slamming shut behind him.

That left Dream and Eret alone in the playroom. Tommy was still shivering against his back, and Wilbur was practically holding his breath to hear more of what Eret had to say. To find out exactly how much of a role they played in this.

He didn’t have to wait long to hear them speak.

“Dream, may I ask you something?”

Dream made a questioning noise. “Sure. What is it?”

There was a pause, and Wilbur heard fabric shifting. He could picture Eret shuffling around the room, whatever skirt or gown they were wearing swishing around their legs.

“I overheard some soldiers of yours speaking earlier about their orders regarding Theseus and Orpheus, and something one of them said troubled me.”

“How so?”

Eret hesitated. “I... I believe I heard one of them mention a plan to execute Theseus, which goes against what our agreement was for my cooperation.”

There was another beat of silence as the air became thick with tension. Even though Wilbur couldn’t see the conversation going on outside, he could imagine Dream and Eret’s silent standoff. The way Eret would purse their lips to keep a poker face while secretly fiddling with the corner of their skirt to let out some of their nerves.

“Eret, you don’t consider yourself stupid, correct?”



“Um-”

“Because the fact that you asked that question seems a little stupid to me.” There were more footsteps, and through the slits in the wood, Wilbur could just barely make out the outline of Dream and Eret standing face to face. “You know as well as I do the risk we would take by letting Theseus live. If I don’t execute him, he still has a claim to the throne and could usurp you. Isn’t the entire reason you agreed to this partnership was because you didn’t want to lose your title as King of Eldingvegr?”

Eret sucked in a sharp breath. “I mean- yes, but you also promised me no harm would come to either of those boys. You told me that they would just be exiled from the planet!”

“At the time I promised that, but now after going over it more with my strategists, we’ve determined that leaving either of them alive would be a very stupid move to make.” There was another pause, and Wilbur watched the silhouette of who he guessed was Dream glance around the room. “What is this room anyway?”

“It’s- um, it’s where the princes would play when they were both children,” Eret explained, their voice wavering now.

Dream hummed and took a few steps across the room towards the window. “You’ve known them both for a long time, correct?”

“I was there when Theseus was born, and I met Orpheus when he was barely three years old, so I’ve practically known them both their entire lives.”

“Ah, so this hesitation I’m hearing from you is fondness for the two of them, am I right?”

The question was mocking. Dream’s tone was anything but sympathetic, and Wilbur wasn’t sure if it made him want to punch something or cry.

“I suppose you could say that,” Eret replied softly.

“Well,” Wilbur watched as Dream stepped right up to Eret, the two of them standing at the exact same height. “You need to get rid of that fondness right now. You wanted to keep your position as King and not hand it over to Theseus when he turned eighteen, and now you’ve gotten your wish. As soon as Prince Theseus is dead, you will be re-crowned as King Eret instead of just the King Regent, and Eldingvegr will be officially part of the Essempi Empire.”

Eret took a shuddering breath. “I... I understand. But do you plan on executing both Theseus and Orpheus? Because Orpheus has no claim to the throne. He’s not a threat.”

“Orpheus is a threat because of his Voice,” Dream said, laughing a bit. “Admittedly, he’s not a major threat, more like an annoying bug than anything else. But I don’t like letting bugs fly around my head. It’s just distracting.”

A bug. Dream was comparing him to little more than a bug.

Wilbur knew that shouldn't be what he was focusing on. There was so much more in that conversation for him to be upset about, but for some reason hearing this Emperor call him an annoying bug stung just as much as learning that Eret had sold them out. Betrayed them to keep their title as King.

"I don't tolerate annoyances very well," Dream continued, walking back towards Eret. "*Any* kind of annoyances. An empire isn't an easy thing to run, and I'm not about to let some kid with a siren Voice distract me from what's important." He leaned closer to Eret's face. "Are you going to be an annoyance, Eret?"

Tommy had stopped shivering behind him, but he was still hugging Wilbur tight. Wilbur, meanwhile, didn't dare breathe as silence fell heavily over the room.

One beat.

Two.

Then,

"No, no I will not."

Letting out a pleased hum, Dream straightened up. "Great. I have to check how the rest of the invasion is going, and I'll let you know when my soldiers find the princes."

And with that, Dream opened the door to the playroom, but before he could leave, Eret spoke again.

"Orpheus is nearly the same age as you."

Dream paused. "What?"

"You referred to him as a kid, but you're twenty, and he's nineteen. I wouldn't say he's a child compared to you."

"All the more reason to eliminate him," Dream said, although there was something tight in his voice that hadn't been there before.

Then, the door clicked shut, and Dream was gone.

Eret was still in the room. Wilbur could see the outline of their curly hair, and watched as they let out another shuddering breath, dragging their hands down their face and crouching down until they were practically sitting on the floor.

"What have I done?" They murmured, horror dripping from their words.

That was the only sound in the room for a long time. Wilbur kept Tommy behind him, still not daring to move with the traitor so close to them. Tommy had stopped moving much at all, and Wilbur was beginning to wonder if he'd fallen asleep,

Reaching down to the arms wrapped around his waist, he gently squeezed one of Tommy's hands, and Tommy tightened his arms in return. So he was still awake then.

The longer Eret sat in the playroom without saying anything, the more uncomfortable Wilbur realized he was. But he didn't try to readjust. Instead, he just waited.

And waited.

And waited.

After what felt like ages of waiting for something to happen, Wilbur heard the door open again, and he and Tommy both stiffened at the sound.

Before Wilbur could start to panic at the possibility of more soldiers coming in though, he was instead shocked when he heard another familiar voice speak up.

"They still haven't found them," Tubbo whispered, his silhouette kneeling down in front of Eret on the floor.

Behind him, Wilbur felt Tommy jump at the sound of his best friend's voice.

"I know," Eret murmured. "Do you have any idea where they could've gone?"

At that moment, Wilbur was unbelievably grateful that they had stopped using the playroom by the time Tubbo had started his work at the palace.

"I have no fucking clue. I tried to get Tommy to take the sleeping pills but he just- he didn't want to and I couldn't make him without seeming weird."

"It's alright. That's not your fault. You followed my orders perfectly," Eret said in a mournful tone.

"Okay, that's, um, a bit of a relief. Because these soldiers are really freaking me out with the shit they're saying," Tubbo said, and Wilbur could picture him wringing his hands. "Like they keep saying they're planning to execute Tommy and Wil but that's not true, right?" His voice began to waver, and Wilbur could see his silhouette hunching in on itself. "They're just going to exile the two of them, right? You promised me that's all they'd do. Just exile and nothing more."

Eret was silent. Tubbo waited for them to respond.

"Your Highness?" Tubbo pushed when they didn't say anything. "They're not going to kill Tommy and Wilbur, right?"

Eret took a deep breath, lifting their head and wiping at their face.

"Sorry Tubbo, I was just lost in thought. But yes, they're only going to be exiled. Dream promised me he wouldn't harm them."

Tubbo's silhouette slumped in relief. "Thank fuck, you had me worried there for a minute."

“My apologies. I know you’ve been through a lot the past few days.”

“It’s... well, I was gonna say it’s okay, but it’s not. I’m still really fucking pissed that you sold out our planet to Dream.”

“I understand, and you have every right to be upset with me.”

Tubbo considered that for a moment, and Wilbur watched as he pushed to his feet. “When Tommy and Wilbur get sent off planet, can... can you tell me what planet they end up on? I just- I wanna know that they’re okay, y’know?”

Eret’s breathing hitched, and they nodded. “Of course. I’ll- I’ll tell you where they end up, and I’ll ensure they’re both okay. That they end up on a planet they can seek asylum on.”

“Okay,” Tubbo murmured, sounding like he was half talking to himself. “Okay, that’s good. That’s- yeah, okay.”

There was a heavy silence again.

Then,

“We should go,” Eret suddenly said, shifting to stand up. “Dream is probably going to be looking for me soon enough.”

“What should I do?” Tubbo asked, getting up beside them.

“You stay with the rest of the staff. Do what the soldiers tell you, let them search whatever they want. They won’t take anything, and if they do, let me know and I’ll have it returned to you. Just don’t argue with them without me nearby, understood?”

Tubbo nodded, and Wilbur watched as their silhouettes headed towards the door.

“Um, okay. By the way, I think Lord Foolish is looking for you.”

Eret paused, letting out a breath between their teeth. “Shit. Of course he is. He must be losing his mind right about now.”

“Did you not tell him about this ahead of time?” Tubbo asked, the door creaking as he pulled it open.

“No, I didn’t. I knew he wouldn’t handle it well.” They held the door open for Tubbo. “I’ll go talk to him. You stay safe, alright?”

“I’ll do my best, Your Highness.”

Eret made a pleased noise, and with that, both of them left the room, the door slamming shut behind them. Finally, for the first time in what felt like ages, the playroom was empty.

Like a water balloon dropping on his head, Wilbur slumped back, letting out a breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding. Behind him, Tommy’s arms dropped the hug they

still had him in.

“Can I-”

“Yeah, yeah you can crawl around now,” Wilbur whispered to his little brother.

Tommy wiggled out from behind Wilbur, the blue glow of his freckles illuminating the way his eyes were glittering with tears. He didn’t even need to wait for Tommy to ask. As soon as he was readjusted, Wilbur held out his arms, and Tommy dove into them.

There was a moment of silence as Tommy trembled in his arms. Then another. He was trying to hold it in, and it made Wilbur’s chest ache.

“It’s okay,” Wilbur told him as softly as possible. “There’s no one here right now. We’re safe for the moment.”

And that seemed to shatter Tommy into a million pieces. A quiet sob tore from his throat, and he buried his face in Wilbur’s shirt to muffle his cries as tears began to flow. Wilbur hugged him close, having to practically pull Tommy into his lap because of how cramped the crawl space was, but Tommy didn’t seem to notice. He just clutched at Wilbur’s shirt, his narrow shoulders shaking as he sobbed.

“I- I- I can’t believe Tubbo- he knew and- and he didn’t-”

“I know, I can’t believe it either,” Wilbur whispered, his voice thick with his own unshed tears. He couldn’t cry right now. Not when Tommy needed him to have his shit together more than ever.

“I thought he was my best friend,” Tommy said, his curls brushing against Wilbur’s chin. “But he- he was fine with Eret exiling us. He didn’t even care!”

“I doubt that’s true,” Wilbur murmured, carding his fingers through Tommy’s hair. “I don’t think Tubbo had much of a choice.”

Tommy shuddered again, twisting his fingers into the collar of Wilbur’s shirt. “But- But Eret betrayed us. They had a choice and they sold us out because they didn’t want me to be king.”

Wilbur didn’t have a response for that one, because Tommy was right. Eret betrayed them to keep the crown on their head, and even if Dream had lied about not killing Tommy originally, it was a betrayal all the same.

“Are we going to die?”

The question came out of the quiet darkness, Tommy lifting his head from Wilbur’s shirt with tears streaked down his freckled cheeks. Wilbur could see the glow of his own freckles reflecting off Tommy’s eyes, but still kept vain hope that Tommy wouldn’t be able to see how terrified he was.

Leaning down, Wilbur pressed a kiss into Tommy’s hair.

“No, we’re not.”

It was a lie. It was a bold-faced lie because Wilbur had no idea if they were going to die or not. They were trapped in a crawl space far too small for the both of them, in a palace flooded with soldiers out to kill them both. Niki was trapped, Tubbo wasn’t going to help them, and Eret couldn’t be trusted.

They couldn’t rely on anyone but each other. Tommy couldn’t rely on anyone but *Wilbur*, and Wilbur had no fucking clue how he was going to get them both out of this.

But Tommy didn’t need to know that. He needed to stay calm. To know Wilbur would keep him safe.

“Try to get some sleep,” Wilbur said after a few minutes of silence, having gone back to running his fingers through Tommy’s hair.

Another shiver ran down Tommy’s spine as he curled in closer to Wilbur.

“How are we supposed to sleep after that?”

Wilbur winced, and was relieved Tommy’s face was buried in his chest again so he didn’t see it.

“You- You just need to try,” he whispered, stuttering over his words as his vision blurred with tears.

Tommy didn’t argue with that. Instead, he just let his eyes flutter shut, and Wilbur continued to run his fingers through Tommy’s hair as he waited for the boy to fall asleep.

Surprisingly, it didn’t take long. Exhausted from their entire world being turned on its head, Tommy’s breathing soon began to slow. He melted into Wilbur’s hold, and then, soft snores began to rumble through Tommy’s chest as he slipped fully into the warm arms of sleep.

Wilbur wasn’t so lucky. He stayed wide awake, staring at the hole that was covered by the toy chest, waiting for the minute the door to the playroom opened again.

They were going to die. Trapped in the home they’d grown up in, it wasn’t going to be long before the soldiers found them hiding in here, and they were both going to be killed by Dream.

Hot tears spilled down his cheeks, and this time Wilbur didn’t try to stop them. He just did his best to cry in silence, pleading with the universe that Tommy wouldn’t wake up during this moment of weakness.

Thankfully, Tommy didn’t wake up. And soon, despite all odds, Wilbur fell into a restless sleep as well.

haha the boys are... not in a very good spot at the moment, but hey! they're still alive so that counts for something! also, yes, that one scene with the Voice was directly inspired by Dune, but that's the most direct parallel i'm gonna make with this story and that movie. that scene was just so cool I desperately wanted to do it with Tommy and Wilbur and by god was it fun to write

also we got a bit more insight into what was going on behind the scenes that the brothers didn't know about. Eret is a complicated character in this, they're not innocent by any means, but they didn't want the boys to be killed either, so it's a messed up situation overall

man I can't wait to write the next chapter

I have a playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)!

I also have a discord server where you can talk about my fics!  
<https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! if you did let me know what you thought down in the comments below, I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# waiting games for the damned

## Chapter Summary

They need to wait for an opportunity to escape.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone im back with more!!! sorry this chapter took a bit longer to get out than others, 1) i've been really busy lately and 2) I had to finish up world forgetting first but now that that's done WE ARE FULL FOCUS ON THIS ONE BOYS LETS GOOOOOO

thank you all so much for all the lovely things you've said about this story so far. I'm really so excited for you guys to see the story I have planned out for this, and I'm so glad so many of you are along for the ride

TWs for this chapter: talk about rationing food, not having enough food, typical violence, near death experiences

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Wilbur woke up next, for a brief moment, he was disoriented by the darkness. He couldn't remember where he was, or why his back was so sore. He could feel Tommy breathing against his chest, and pulled his little brother closer as he blinked open sticky eyes to try and figure out where he was.

There was a moment of blissful ignorance. Then, it all came rushing back.

The invasion. Running from the guards. Tommy using his Voice to help them escape. Niki being dragged away. Eret and Dream's conversation. Eret's *betrayal*.

Wilbur sucked in a sharp gasp between his teeth as the memories washed back over him. That's right. They were trapped in the crawl space hidden in the walls of their playroom, and it was only a matter of time before Dream's soldiers found them and led them to their executions.

They were fucked.

Tommy woke up with a scream on his lips that Wilbur barely managed to smother in time with his hands. It took several moments of fevered shushing and practically pinning Tommy



to his chest, but soon enough he realized that it was Wilbur holding onto him, and slumped back into his grip.

“Remember, you have to be quiet,” Wilbur whispered in his ear as he dropped his hand.

Letting out a low whine, Tommy pushed away from Wilbur, although he couldn’t go very far in the crawlspace. “Sorry, I just- I dreamt about the soldiers.”

Wilbur winced. Tommy’s voice cracked when he said ‘the soldiers’, and that alone was enough to tell him the dream wasn’t anything good.

“It’s okay. No one heard you,” Wilbur reassured him. “You just need to do your best to stay quiet now.”

From what he could tell, there were no soldiers currently in the playroom. He could hear footsteps distantly echoing in the hallway, but they wouldn’t be heard in the crawlspace as long as they kept their voices low.

“How long are we going to stay in here?” Tommy asked, bringing his knees up to his chest.

“I... I’m not sure,” Wilbur told him, mirroring Tommy’s position and resting his chin on his knees. “I’m still figuring that part out.”

There was a lot Wilbur still needed to figure out. Like when they were going to leave the crawlspace, how they were going to avoid getting caught by the guards, where they would even go if they managed to make it out of the palace.

The more Wilbur thought about it, the fewer options they seemed to have. If by some miracle the two of them managed to get out of the palace without being spotted, he was sure that Dream had installed soldiers all along the Røkkrring. Of course, they could try fleeing to Sólsid or Nóttsid because he doubted Dream had many soldiers on those sides of the planet, but both he and Tommy were wearing little more than pajamas. They’d freeze to death before they got to one of the mining towns in Nóttsid, which would only be slightly preferable to dying of dehydration in the deserts of Sólsid.

Right now, the three options presented in front of Wilbur were: death by the cold, death by heatstroke, or death via public execution. He couldn’t deny that the public execution route was looking like the best option for them.

“Wil?” Tommy whispered as Wilbur stewed in his thoughts. “I’m getting hungry.”

Wilbur let out another sigh between his teeth. And there was option number four: stay in the crawlspace and eventually starve to death.

“Look around in here and see if you can find anything,” Wilbur told Tommy, figuring he might as well give him something to do. “We used to keep snacks in here, remember? Maybe we left, I dunno, a can or something.”

It was a long shot, but there was a very small chance one of them had left food in here all those years ago. Of course, even if they did leave food in here, it would almost certainly be

inedible because it had gone bad. But there was an even smaller chance they could've left food that didn't expire in here. All they needed was a single can or a protein bar that didn't smell bad.

As Tommy searched, Wilbur continued to think over their options. So escaping the palace and going to Nóttsid or Sólsid wasn't an option. They could try to hide out somewhere in the Røkkrring, but it would be insanely dangerous and would probably only buy them a few extra days at most. And that was only if they could find some Eldingvegr citizen willing to hide them from Essempi soldiers.

The more Wilbur thought about it, the more he realized the truth. They couldn't stay on Eldingvegr at all.

If they could get off planet, they could flee somewhere else and be granted asylum. But that meant they'd need a shuttle. Wilbur knew how to get to the hangar from the playroom, but it wasn't a short distance. Not to mention, if they were fleeing Eldingvegr, Wilbur had to find Niki first and get her out of her cell. And that wasn't even mentioning the windy season.

Already, Wilbur could hear the howling winds whistling through the walls outside of the crawlspace. The winds had died down for the night of the invasion, but they were already back in full force.

If he and Tommy tried to flee on a shuttle while the winds were in full blast, Wilbur knew full well what would happen. Their ship would be tossed from side to side like a ragdoll, the wings would be ripped off, and they would be launched straight into the icy plains of Nóttsid.

A rather morbid thought crossed his mind at that. If anything, at least it would be a somewhat poetic way to go. Both he and Tommy dying the same way their mother did. He wondered how much it would hurt. If he would pass out, or if he would feel every single thing she felt as the ship was torn into tiny pieces.

Would it help him understand her better? To know what it was like to have your entire world torn apart around you, knowing there was nothing you could do to save yourself?

Shaking his head to clear that from his mind, Wilbur went back to focusing on the wind. It was entirely possible that the wind could die down again tomorrow, but it could also be weeks before they had another calm day. There was no way for Wilbur to know until it happened.

"Holy shit!" Tommy suddenly exclaimed. "I found food!"

Wilbur perked up at that. "What did you find?"

From the faint blue glow of his freckles, Wilbur could just make out Tommy grinning as he held up four small rectangles wrapped in plastic. "Breakfast bars!"

Oh thank fuck. While the breakfast bars definitely wouldn't taste good after sitting in a dark room for nearly ten years, if they were still sealed in their packaging, it wouldn't poison them to eat them.

Setting three of the bars down, Tommy went to tear open one of them, but Wilbur reached out a hand to stop him.

“Wait,” Wilbur said, grabbing his wrist, “we need to be careful with these. This is the only food we have right now, so we have to ration it.”

Tommy frowned, setting the bar down. “How much do we have to stretch it out?”

Four bars. If they each ate one bar a day, that only gave them two days worth of food, and that was already a pitiful amount to eat. If they split one bar a day, that gave them four days worth of food, although it wouldn’t be pleasant for their stomachs. And if Wilbur really wanted to stretch it, they could split each bar into quarters, which would barely sustain them but would last them eight days.

Eight days at the most. But they needed to be able to run when the wind died down, meaning they’d need more energy than what a quarter of a breakfast bar a day could give them. So splitting one bar a day seemed like the best option. It still wouldn’t be pleasant, but they wouldn’t be as starved as they would with the quarters.

So four days. That was the most they could get out of the food.

“We’ll split this one in half,” Wilbur said, picking up one of the bars and tearing open the plastic. “Try to take it slow. If we don’t find anything else, it might be the only thing we eat today.”

Tommy’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head at that. “But why? We have four bars!”

Sighing, Wilbur fought the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “We can’t exactly leave the fucking crawlspace right now to go get a snack from the kitchens, okay?”

“Well obviously I know that!” Tommy scoffed. “But we’re not gonna stay here for more than a day, right?”

Wilbur was silent, staring at the breakfast bar in his hands. He broke it in two, tossing the plastic to the side and handing Tommy his half. Tommy looked between the bar and his face for a moment, a crease forming between his brows.

“You’ve had time to think, how long are you thinking we’re going to stay here, Wil?” He whispered. “Just- don’t sugarcoat it. I’m not a baby. I wanna know what’s going on.”

Setting Tommy’s half of the bar down in front of his legs, Wilbur slumped back against the wall. “I think our only option is to try and steal a shuttle so we can get off planet. But we can’t do that until we have another break in the wind.”

Tommy’s eyes widened. “Wil, that could take weeks.”

“I know.”

“We- We can’t stay in here for *weeks*!”

“I know, but I don’t know what else we can do.”

Letting out a shaky breath, Tommy settled against the opposite wall, worry washing over his face as the freckles on his cheeks glowed just a tad brighter. He wrapped his arms around himself, rubbing circles into his arms with his thumbs, and Wilbur waited for him to process it.

“Nóttsid and Sólsid aren’t options,” Tommy muttered, seeming like he was going through the same thought process as Wilbur. “And we’ll be captured if we stay in the Rökkrring.”

“Yup. The entire palace is against us,” Wilbur told him. “If we want to survive, we need to get as far away from Dream and his soldiers as possible.”

“Fuck,” Tommy breathed out, curling in tighter on himself. “Fucking shit I just- how are we even supposed to steal a shuttle?”

“We’ll have to just make a run for it,” Wilbur murmured, ducking his eyes to the ground.

Tommy whimpered at that. “We could get caught.”

“We could. But we have to leave the crawl space eventually.”

Taking another breath, Tommy nodded, something grim having taken over the worry on his face. “I... I think I saw something that said the winds are gonna die down again the day after tomorrow.”

Wilbur straightened up at that, wincing when his head bumped against the low ceiling. “Where did you hear that?”

“Last night after dinner, before I asked you to come into my room I looked up some stuff about the windy season, since we’d been talking about it. I saw a weather report, and it said that there might be another die down pretty soon.”

“Trying to predict the winds even a few days out isn’t always accurate,” Wilbur pointed out, biting the inside of his cheek.

Tommy nodded. “It’s not. But it’s something, right?”

And yeah, he certainly had a point there. While the report could’ve been wrong, and the winds would still be in full force the day after tomorrow, there was also the chance it could be right. Besides, they quite literally had no other options for what to do except to just sit and wait. At least this way, they had something to count down too. Time to prepare, and map out what their plan was going to be.

“Yeah. It’s something,” Wilbur agreed, forcing himself to nod. “That’s really good.”

There was a beat of silence between them. Tommy stared down at his half of the breakfast bar, before he brought it up to his mouth and took a bite. He winced at the taste, but swallowed it down the same way a child would force himself to get down gross medicine.

“Guess we gotta wait then.”

He took another bite of the breakfast bar, and Wilbur did the same with his own. It tasted like eating hardened mush with the vague hint of some kind of nutty flavor, but it was nowhere near pleasant. He chewed mechanically, and it went down his throat like he was trying to swallow a rock.

“We’ll get out of here soon.”

The look Tommy gave Wilbur at that told him his little brother didn’t believe him. Wilbur didn’t believe himself either.

They spent the rest of the day in the crawlspace, and it was just as maddening as Wilbur imagined it would be. Every once in a while they heard the sound of footsteps moving down the hall, and the two would go dead silent, hearts pounding out of their chests as they waited to hear the playroom door open. No one came into the playroom though, which was a good sign. If they weren’t searching the playroom, that meant they were safe from being caught hiding there. At least for the time being.

Still, it was exhausting. Every few minutes a huge spike of fear would stab straight through Wilbur’s chest when he heard footsteps, needing several minutes to get his heart rate back to normal. Then, it would jump again at another sound, giving Wilbur hardly more than a few minutes to breathe.

There was also the boredom. Even in a perpetual state of fearing for your life, there was only so long you could stare at a dark wall before wishing *something* would happen to put you out of your misery. Wilbur ran through different plans in his head, mapping out routes while listening to the wind howl outside the walls of the crawlspace.

Tommy was... surprisingly tolerable. Given his little brother’s high energy and tendency to loudly announce whatever problems he was currently having, Wilbur had expected Tommy to drive him nuts after a few hours in the tiny space together. But Tommy stayed quiet for the most part, burying his face into his knees and only looking up when some noises outside the crawlspace got a bit too close for comfort.

It worried Wilbur to say the least, but it’s not like they could talk through everything they’d learned when they were still in a very precarious situation like this. Once they got off planet he could figure out what was going on with Tommy. But Wilbur had to admit, it was hard to try and focus on Tommy when he was already struggling so hard to keep himself from spiraling into a mind-numbing panic.

It wasn’t like they had any clocks in the crawlspace, so Wilbur could only guess it was night by how tired he was. An eternity had ticked by in a day, but somehow, Wilbur found himself drifting off without much trouble. Before he nodded off entirely, Tommy crawled back over to him, curling into his side to use his chest as a pillow. And like that, the two brothers fell back asleep.

The next day was most of the same monotony. The wind was still screaming outside, and no one came near the playroom save for the footsteps passing by outside in the hall. Hunger was

making Wilbur's stomach cramp painfully, and Tommy whined about wanting more food, but he didn't let either of them have more than half a bar like the day before. It was a pitiful amount, but by some miracle, Wilbur had found an old bottle of water the day before that the boys must've tossed in there along with the breakfast bars so many years ago.

They rationed the water even more than the food. It tasted like dust, but it was still water, and that was even more precious than food was for the time being. By the second day in the crawlspace, Wilbur's mouth tasted like sandpaper, but he didn't give into the temptation and continued to ration the water. At the very least, neither of them could move much in the crawlspace, so they weren't burning a lot of energy.

Tommy seemed to get a bit more of his usual vigor back by day two, and Wilbur found himself bickering with Tommy over the slightest things. Whether the breakfast bars tasted like dirt or rotten oats, how many soldiers had just walked down the hallway outside, if Foolish was bored without having Tommy around to tutor—just stupid, pointless things they could debate over as a way to get their excess energy out. They were both going a bit stir crazy, but thankfully none of the discussions boiled over into anything serious. They were both too shaken up to actually get upset with one another, which was quite the relief for Wilbur considering the last thing they needed was to get into an argument when they literally couldn't get more than two feet away from each other.

For that third night in the crawlspace, Wilbur slept with his head on Tommy's shoulder, since his neck was getting a painful crick in it from sleeping against the wall. It wasn't much better hunched over leaning on his brother, but it was a minor improvement, and Wilbur would take just about anything in their current situation.

When Wilbur opened his eyes on the third day of their hiding, he immediately sensed something was off. For a moment, he couldn't tell what it was. The hairs on his arms stood on end, dread wrapping around his windpipe like a coiling snake waiting to dig its fangs into his throat.

Wilbur held his breath as he tried to figure out what was wrong. The crawlspace was silent, the only sound echoing off the narrow walls being the sound of Tommy's gentle breathing.

Wait. That was it. It was silent.

There was no wind.

The realization was like a slap in the face, startling Wilbur out of his half-asleep stupor as he reached over to shake Tommy awake.

"Wh- Wil, what's going on?" Tommy whispered, blinking a few times as he lifted his head.

"The wind died down," Wilbur whispered back, something like panic and euphoria both bubbling up in the back of his throat.

For a moment, Tommy stared at him like he didn't have the slightest clue why that was something to be excited about. But then, his eyes widened, and he let out a sharp gasp. "The wind is gone! That means—"

“We’re getting out of here,” Wilbur told him, already reaching for the remaining breakfast bars. He handed one whole one to Tommy, and took the other for himself. “We don’t need to ration anymore, so eat the whole thing. You’re gonna need the strength.”

While a part of Wilbur wanted to play it safe, to ration another half and leave the last bar in here in case they needed to come back, he also knew there was no point in doing that. Because if they didn’t escape today, they were as good as dead already.

There was no going back here. Once they left, that was it.

Tommy ripped open the plastic around the breakfast bar and stuffed it down with surprising fervor considering how much he bemoaned the taste the day before. Wilbur had to fight to force his down, his nerves overriding the demanding rumble of his stomach. Still, he knew he needed the energy, and ignored the way the bar sat heavily in the pit of his stomach.

They drank the rest of the water as well, although there still wasn’t enough for it to be anything satisfying. It would keep them running though, and that was what mattered most.

Then... there was nothing else to do. Nothing they could do to put off the inevitable. They had to move as fast as possible, before the winds picked up again.

Wilbur’s limbs were stiff as he crawled back to the hole that the toy trunk sat in front of. He waited, listening for any sign of footsteps walking down the hallway. When he was only met with dead silence, he swallowed down the terror crawling up his throat, and pushed the toy trunk away.

Pink light filtered into the crawlspace from the playroom, making both Tommy and Wilbur wince since they had adjusted to the darkness over the past few days. It took Wilbur a few seconds of blinking to get his vision back, but he stumbled out of the hole, practically falling over onto the rug as he gestured for Tommy to follow him.

Standing was a painful affair. His legs hadn’t been properly straightened out in days, and aches shot through his limbs like electricity as he stretched himself out. He actually almost fell when he tried to stand up, but caught himself on the wall and stayed there for a few minutes, waiting for the black dots to fade from his vision.

Tommy struggled even more than he did. When he tried to stand, he didn’t catch himself on the wall, and fell face first into the rug. He muffled his pained groan with the rug itself, rolling onto his back and glaring at Wilbur when he saw his struggles not to laugh.

“Fuck you,” Tommy whispered, holding up a hand to flip him off.

Despite the fact that Wilbur’s heart was already pounding at the fact that they were no longer safely hidden in the crawlspace, he couldn’t help but grin as he offered his hand to pull Tommy to his feet. “Lil baby man can’t stand on his own,” he teased.

Tommy scowled as Wilbur pulled him up. “You’re such a bitch! I’ve been curled up in a tiny ass room for three days!”

“I was too, and you don’t see me falling over like I’m learning how to walk again,” Wilbur shot back.

Letting out an affronted sound, Tommy tried to smack Wilbur’s forehead, but Wilbur caught his wrist at the last minute. When Tommy opened his mouth to protest, Wilbur used his free hand to slap a hand over Tommy’s mouth, his heart rate spiking.

“Don’t,” Wilbur hissed. “We need to be quiet, remember?”

Tommy’s eyes darted towards the door, his annoyance disappearing as soon as it happened. Wilbur dropped his hand, and Tommy let out a shaky breath. “Shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Wilbur whispered, following Tommy’s gaze to the door. “We just need to be careful.”

There was still silence on the other side of the door. No footsteps. No voices. Outside the window, the surface of Eldingvegr looked almost the same as it did before the invasion happened. The purple-pink sky was no longer hazy with smoke and ash, and while there were some burnt trees marking the hellfire that had rained down on the surface, there didn’t seem to be any major damage.

It was surprising how it almost seemed like nothing had happened. Like if Wilbur and Tommy walked out of the playroom, they would be able to go back to their lives. As if Tommy would be able to waltz into his lessons, while Wilbur would find Niki waiting for him in her room, ready to update him on all the political drama he’d missed.

But Wilbur knew that wasn’t the case. The minute they left the playroom, they were going to be running for their lives. He eyed the trees outside the window. Their branches were still—no bending or swaying in time with the wind. This was the only opportunity they were going to get.

Reaching out, Wilbur gripped Tommy’s hand in his own. “Are you ready?”

Fear flashed through Tommy’s cool, blue eyes. But he nodded anyway, and squeezed Wilbur’s hand with startling strength. “I’m ready.”

Okay. They could do this. They just had to be careful.

Ice crawled up Wilbur’s throat as he creaked open the door of the playroom. Peeking his head out, he looked up and down the halls, and was relieved to find they were empty. They left the playroom behind them, taking every step with the same kind of care they would if they were walking through a minefield. There was no running this time. Instead, Wilbur knew they needed to focus on staying unseen more than anything else.

They came to their first set of guards at the end of the hallway. The soldiers were facing away from the brothers, chatting in low voices without a single glance behind them. Wilbur crept up until he was only a few feet away from them, and whispered out a soft, “*Go to sleep.*”



His low Voice echoed off the walls as both guards collapsed. Making a shushing gesture at Tommy, he tugged him down the next hallway, and the real journey began.

It was terrifying. Wilbur's limbs were practically made of ice, daggers of fear stabbing into him every time he spotted another pair of soldiers. His throat was aching from how many times he had to use his Voice to knock the guards out but he pushed past the pain anyway.

The trip across the palace to Niki's room took so much longer than it should have. The two pressed themselves against walls, ducked into broom closets, and only used Wilbur's Voice when it was absolutely necessary. Wilbur had no idea what was going to be waiting for them when they got to Niki's room, but they would figure something out.

Darting down twisting hallways, two servants spotted the boys, stiffening at the sight of the brothers. But instead of calling the guards, as soon as the servants saw Tommy, they bowed their heads and turned the other way.

The servants could be killed for that, if Dream found out they let Tommy and Wilbur go. But apparently their loyalty to Tommy's bloodline outweighed their personal safety, and Tommy thanked them in breathless whispers as the two continued to run.

Finally, they turned the corner where Niki's room was. Wilbur cursed under his breath when he saw what they had set up to contain her. Two Essempi soldiers were stationed in front of her door, with a shimmering barrier set up between them and the walls of her room. Wilbur recognized the barrier, knowing it had a silencing feature on it which must've been how they negated Niki using her Voice to escape. Those fucking bastards.

Figuring they had wasted enough time being subtle already, Wilbur turned down the hallway in full view of the soldiers with Tommy in tow. The soldiers' heads whipped towards him, but before either could try to stand, Wilbur shouted out a strict command.

*"Sleep!"*

Both soldiers fell to the ground. The door to Niki's room opened behind the barrier, and a sob pressed itself against Wilbur's chest when he saw his best friend's face staring at him from behind the shimmer.

Niki didn't seem harmed. There were deep bags under her eyes, and she seemed a few shades paler than she should've been, but she had no injuries. Her mouth was moving in rapid motion, and Wilbur held up a finger to her as he tried to figure out how to turn the silencing feature off the barrier.

"I got it!" Tommy whisper-shouted, crouching down next to the door. He pressed a button, and suddenly, Niki's voice filtered through the shield.

"Wilbur!"

"Niki, oh thank fuck you're alright," Wilbur said, pressing his hands against the barrier. "Those bastards didn't hurt you, right?"

Niki shook her head. “No. They just locked me in here and haven’t let me out in three days. The Ambassadors visited me and told me once the Essempi forces settled the rest of the planet, they’d be taking me back to Themis.” Suddenly, she let out a sharp gasp. “Wait, Wil, you need to know that Eret-”

“They betrayed us. We know,” Wilbur told her, his chest aching at the reminder. “We overheard them and Dream talking the other night.”

“They sold you two out so they could stay King. Dream plans to execute you if he finds you two,” Niki said, glancing between him and Tommy. “How are you even here? I thought you guys escaped the palace!”

“Wil had us hiding out in this tiny ass room,” Tommy cut in, still crouched at the edge of the barrier and fiddling with the settings. “But we’re leaving.”

Wilbur nodded. “What he said. We’ve been hiding, but there’s a break in the wind today so we’re gonna try and get off planet.”

Niki’s eyes widened. “That... Shit, yeah, okay. That’s the best plan, but where are we gonna go?”

“I’ll figure that out when we’re in the shuttle and I can see a map of the nearby systems,” Wilbur explained. “We just need to get you out of here first.”

“I’m trying to get the barrier down but it’s fucking passcode locked,” Tommy said, frowning as he continued to tap different settings.

“You guys need to hurry. A patrol comes by here every few minutes,” Niki told them, her eyes darting nervously down the hall. “I’ve tried everything I could to get the barrier unlocked from in here, but it’s useless.”

And just like that, there was a deafening thud at the end of the hallway. Whipping his head to the right, a rock dropped into Wilbur’s gut when he was met with five soldiers marching towards them.

“There they are!” One of the soldiers shouted. “Silencers on!”

Wilbur wasn’t able to get a single sound out of his throat before all the soldiers tapped a button on the sides of their helmets. Silencers. That meant they couldn’t hear anything he or Niki said. Which meant that their Voices wouldn’t work on them.

Fuck.

“Tommy-”

“I’m trying!” Tommy exclaimed, his hands shaking as he started pressing buttons at random. “It’s- It’s not unlocking!”

Cursing, Wilbur slammed a fist into the barrier, watching as light rippled through it. “Fuck! We need to get this down!”

Dropping to her knees, Niki focused her gaze on the sleeping soldiers that Wilbur had knocked out.

*"Wake up and fight for us!"* She commanded.

The two soldiers stumbled to their feet like puppets yanked by an invisible string. They both ran in the direction of the other soldiers, and the two groups began to fight as Tommy continued to struggle with the barrier.

"It's not working!" Tommy cried out, slamming his fist against the barrier. "I don't know why but it's just—"

"Let me see that," Wilbur said, dropping to his knees. He pushed a few buttons on the settings, but the barrier remained firmly in place. The fighting was growing louder as the mind-controlled soldiers got pushed back by the others, and he could barely hear himself think over the pounding of his own heart.

This wasn't working. The barrier wasn't dropping like it was supposed to. There was a passcode that kept prompting them, and Wilbur tried several random number variations. All were rejected, and Wilbur cursed as he kicked the bottom of the barrier.

There was a cry from one of the mind-controlled soldiers as he collapsed to the ground, blood rushing out from under his armor. The soldiers were getting closer, and Wilbur couldn't get the damn barrier down.

"Wilbur," Tommy whispered, tugging his sleeve. "We're not gonna get it down without the passcode."

Another cry, and the second soldier was down. They were out of time.

Wilbur looked between Niki's worry and Tommy's terror. If the soldiers caught them, Tommy would die. Niki wasn't going to be hurt by Essempi. The Themisians would never let them hurt her.

"Niki," Wilbur said as he jumped back up, pressing his hand flat against the barrier. "I don't think we can get you out."

Panic was swirling around his mind like a familiar friend. His thoughts were racing as the words spilled from his lips. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think as the soldiers got closer and closer.

"W-Wil, you're not saying what I think you're saying," Niki said, stuttering over her own words as she placed her hand on the other side of the barrier, right over his own.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur nodded. "I'm so sorry but if we stay, we'll die."

Horror washed over Niki's face. "You're leaving me?!"

The betrayal in her voice felt like a knife sliding right between his ribs. "I'm sorry but—" Wilbur pulled Tommy to his feet, peeling his hand away from the barrier and edging back. "I

can't let them kill Tommy!"

"No no no- Wilbur, please!" Niki cried, slamming her fists against the barrier. "You can't leave me like this!"

Tears were pouring down her cheeks as she punched the barrier over and over again, the shimmering surface rippling with each hit.

The soldiers were almost to them now. Wilbur backed up a bit more, a hole tearing itself open where his heart should be. "I'm *so* sorry, Niki."

Then, before she could say anything else, he gripped Tommy's hand and started sprinting the opposite direction.

"WILBUR! TOMMY!"

Wilbur ignored the blinding pain in his chest and ran as fast as he could, his hand wrapped tightly around Tommy's. The soldiers' footsteps drowned out the sounds of Niki's screaming as they ran past her room, and Wilbur shoved down the tears blurring his vision as he led Tommy to the hangar.

Fuck fuck fuck- what had he just done? His legs were screaming and so were his lungs as they raced down the hallways, following the twists and turns down the familiar path to the hangar. When they turned one corner, two soldiers were waiting for them, and Wilbur yelped as he was knocked back against the wall.

*"Fight for us!"* Tommy screamed, his Voice echoing all around them.

The two soldiers ran off to fight the ones chasing them, while a warm hand grabbed Wilbur's again. Wilbur didn't even have time to think about how Tommy had just used his Voice again, and instead just followed him wherever he was running.

One hallway. Another. Right turn. Left. Running running running- it was an endless cycle and Wilbur felt a bit like a rat trapped in a maze. Everything hurt as Wilbur ran on pure adrenaline, lightning coursing through his veins every time they dodged another close call from the soldiers chasing them.

After what felt like eons of running, they skidded to a stop in front of the doors to the hangar. There was a soldier leaning against the entrance, but instead of wearing armor, he was wearing a more formal military uniform. Black fabric cut across his jacket with hints of blue here and there, unlike the green most of the armor sets were decorated with. Along with that, he wasn't wearing a helmet. Instead, Wilbur could see he couldn't have been more than a few years older than Wilbur himself, with dark brown hair and white goggles covering up his eyes.

The guy jumped to his feet as soon as he spotted Wilbur and Tommy. "What the-"

*"Unlock the doors,"* Wilbur hissed, wincing when his throat screamed in pain at using his Voice again.

And just like that, the soldier turned around and opened the doors to the hangar. He gestured for them to walk inside, his posture stiff and unnatural while he was under the influence of the siren power.

*"Open the hangar,"* Wilbur then ordered as he shut the doors to the hangar behind them, making sure to lock the doors from the inside.

With that same stiff gait, the soldier headed to the launch console. Eyeing the options in the hangar, which seemed to be a mix of high end Essempi ships and the original Eldingvegr shuttles he was familiar with, Wilbur decided on a small but sturdy looking Eldingvegr made ship. He dragged Tommy up the ramp and into the ship itself, and right as he slammed the button on the pilot's console to pull the ramp back up, he heard the doors to the hangar burst open.

"Sit down," Wilbur told Tommy as he settled himself in the pilot's seat.

Even though Wilbur wasn't an ace pilot, he did *know* how to fly a shuttle. It was one of the many random things he'd decided to learn as a teenager, when he had more free time than he knew what to do with before his lessons had picked up in pace. It wasn't something he'd ever thought he'd need to know, but figured it would be useful nonetheless. Now, Wilbur was incredibly grateful for this as he went through the familiar procedures to turn the shuttle on.

Outside the ship, he could hear muffled yelling as the soldiers swarmed around the shuttle itself. One was trying to get the goggles-wearing soldier off of the control console, but he was still under Wilbur's Voice control, and was fighting to stay where he was.

The hangar itself began to open with a loud, metal screeching. The shuttle roared to life under his hands, humming as he drove the ship forward and towards the exit.

"Uh, Wilbur?" Tommy said nervously, flinching when a soldier threw a javelin at the window to the ship, only for it to bounce off the glass. "Are we gonna be able to get out?"

"We'll get out," Wilbur said, although he had no idea if that was the truth or not.

The hangar opened completely, and Wilbur flipped a switch on the console. The ship shuddered as it lifted up into the air, and there was more screaming from outside as more javelins flew their way.

"Wilbur!" Tommy yelled when one of the javelins managed to leave a dent in the glass.

"I'm going!" Wilbur shouted back.

Then, before he could let himself think about the soldiers standing in the way of the shuttle's path for too long, he pressed down on the accelerator as hard as he could. Everything snapped as Wilbur and Tommy were both slammed against the seats, the shuttle rushing forward and out into the Eldingvegr atmosphere.

They started flying up. Up up and away from their home planet.

Holy shit. They were doing it. They were really escaping.

“Be on the lookout for ships flying after us. They’re gonna try and shoot us down,” Wilbur said to Tommy as he tilted the shuttle up even more.

Twisting around in his seat, Tommy pressed a few buttons on the dash and brought up a radar to show if there was anything following them. To both Wilbur and Tommy’s surprise, the radar was clear.

“That’s... no one’s following us,” Tommy said quietly, frowning at the screen.

That wasn’t right. Dream should be launching ten different shuttles right at that moment. He should be launching missiles, trying to blow them straight out of the sky.

But there was nothing. The radar showed their tiny dot, and nothing more.

“That’s weird. Why do you think-”

Before Wilbur could finish that sentence, the entire shuttle was blasted to the right. Tommy screamed as his seatbelt barely held him against his chair, and Wilbur let out a pained noise at the pressure on the left side of his face. He cursed and fought to get the shuttle back on path, and the engines screamed in protest as he continued launching them up.

“What the fuck was that?!” Tommy shouted.

“I- I don’t-” Wilbur cut himself off, eyes growing wide. “...Tommy, check the outside weather.”

Tommy pulled up the weather measure for outside the shuttle, and as soon as he did, he let out a sharp gasp. “Oh fuck.”

A spike of fear flashed through Wilbur at that. “Tell me it’s not-”

“The wind,” Tommy said, cutting him off. “The wind is already coming back. It’s mostly in the upper atmosphere, which is why we didn’t hear it down on the ground.”

The shuttle was rocking violently from side to side now, being buffeted back and forth by the winds. They weren’t at their full strength yet, because if they were, he and Tommy would already have flown straight into the ground. But it was getting stronger by the second, which meant that Wilbur had to get them out of the atmosphere as fast as possible.

A cage of fear formed over Wilbur’s heart, and it pounded like a wild animal against the iron bars as he fought to take a single breath. He couldn’t- fuck, no, he couldn’t do this. If he kept flying, they were going to die. The ship was going to be torn apart.

*Metal screeching against metal.*

*Wings being ripped off the shuttle itself, flying like discs as they whipped across the sky.*

*Wilbur screaming. Screaming so loud, he couldn’t hear anything else as he watched his mother disappear into the horizon.*

*They found a hand. A single hand of hers was all that was left. That was what was buried in the cemetery behind the palace. The hand that brushed his hair back when he was trying to sleep, that cupped his cheek and wiped his tears away when he had nightmares, that held his hand and promised him he would never be alone-*

Blaring alarms startled Wilbur out of his thoughts.

“Wilbur!”

Shaking himself off, Wilbur realized Tommy was screaming at him. “Shit, fuck- I-”

“Right the fucking ship or we’re gonna fly into the ground!” Tommy yelled, pointing out the window.

Following his hand, Wilbur saw that they had already spun into a nosedive. On instinct, he yanked the shuttle back up with all the strength in his arms, and his stomach swooped as they were yanked back up into the sky. The pink twilight around them was getting darker as they got higher in the atmosphere, and Wilbur fought to readjust every time the winds blew them to the side.

It was exhausting. Pure terror was the only thing keeping Wilbur going as Tommy screamed beside him. Every movement of the shuttle was a struggle, but they were high enough in the atmosphere that the air had thinned out, and the winds were dying with every passing second.

There was another strong gust from the right, and the ship tilted to the side. Wilbur and Tommy both screamed. This was it. This was their death.

And then-

Then the wind stopped.

The alarms shut off, and the twilight sky was replaced with black. They’d done it. They’d broken through the atmosphere.

The shuttle was painfully easy to pilot as they flew out of the clouds and away from the surface of Eldingvegr. Stars wrapped them in their embrace, and Wilbur was able to switch the ship onto autopilot once all the alarms had turned themselves off.

It was over. He lived. He and Tommy survived the wind.

“Holy fucking shit,” Wilbur whispered, his face wet with tears even though he didn’t know when he’d started crying, “we- I- we fucking-”

He was cut off by Tommy practically jumping out of his seat and into Wilbur’s, hugging him so tightly, neither one of them could breathe.

“You saved us,” Tommy breathed out with a shudder. “You actually fucking saved us.”

Hugging him back just as tight, Wilbur let out a huge sigh of relief, his pounding heart still slamming against his ribcage. “I don’t know how the fuck I did that.”

“I don’t know how the fuck you did that either,” Tommy said, holding onto him for another moment before he let go and got back into his own seat. “But- holy shit, Wil! You flew us through the wind!”

It had been a haze of desperation and terror, but somehow, Wilbur had done it. They were off Eldingvegr, and because of the wind, Dream wouldn’t be able to follow them. It had no doubt picked back up completely at this point, so no shuttles would even be able to launch until it died down again.

“We... We need to figure out where to go now,” Wilbur said, slowly collecting the scattered pieces of himself that had been blown apart by his fear.

“Do you have a planet in mind?” Tommy asked, re-tightening his seatbelt.

Shaking his head, Wilbur tapped a few buttons on the screen in front of him, pulling up a map of the nearby systems. They needed to find a planet that wasn’t under Essempi’s control, or wasn’t allied with them. They didn’t have a full fuel tank, so they just had to find the closest planet that fit that criteria.

Wilbur scrolled through the map for a few minutes, disregarding planet after planet when he saw they were either Essempi’s control or allied with them. It seemed like every nearby planet had some relation to Essempi, and he cursed himself for not realizing that Dream was going to target Eldingvegr sooner.

It took a lot of digging, but soon enough, Wilbur found a planet that had no relation to Essempi. As soon as his eyes landed on the name, his breath caught in his throat, because there was no way Dream would follow them to this planet even if he knew they were there. Dream wouldn’t fuck with this planet no matter how badly he wanted to kill Wilbur and Tommy.

The only issue was that if they landed on this planet, they very well could be killed just as quickly as they would be killed on Eldingvegr.

“I, um, think I might’ve found where to go,” Wilbur said, staring at the screen as dread pooled in his gut like oil.

Tommy straightened up. “Where is it?” He asked, trying to lean over to Wilbur’s seat to see the screen.

Biting back a wince, Wilbur turned the screen towards Tommy, letting him read the planet name and associations.

“Oh fuck no,” Tommy said immediately, shaking his head and pulling away from the screen as if it had burnt him. “That- what the fuck, Wilbur?! Are you fucking crazy?! We can’t go there!”

“Tommy, it’s the only nearby planet not under Essempi control,” Wilbur told him, the words tasting like dirt on his tongue. “It’s our only option.”



“Our only option? You’re seriously saying our only option is to go to Zephys IV, the capital of the fucking *Antarctic Empire*?!”

Wincing, Wilbur nodded. “Yes. The Antarctic Empire is the only power on this side of the galaxy that can rival Essempi. If we go there and Emperor Philza grants us asylum, Dream won’t be able to touch us.”

Tommy let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, *if* he grants us asylum. You’ve heard the stories about that batshit motherfucker, Wilbur! He’s even more terrifying than Dream!”

“Emperor Philza is ruthless, but he’s not unnecessarily cruel or violent,” Wilbur explained, trying to convince himself of this course of action just as much as he was trying to convince Tommy. “He has no quarrel with Eldingvegr and never has. And I’m sure he won’t be pleased to find out that Essempi is trying to take control of the blaziphane trade.”

“This is- no, this is fucking insane, Wil. This guy is worse than Dream. Has Dream ripped someone’s throat out with his fucking talons before? No! But Emperor Philza has!”

Wilbur frowned. “Where did you even hear that?”

“Tubbo told me, and before you tell me that not everything Tubbo says is true, he heard it from Eret who was talking to Foolish about it so you know it’s real.”

“I... I don’t know if that’s really what Tubbo heard,” Wilbur tried to reassure Tommy, although given the things he *had* heard about Philza, it honestly didn’t seem that out of place. “Either way, Emperor Philza has no reason to harm us. All we’re doing is asking for asylum.”

Tommy shook his head. “No, Wil, we can’t go there. You have to find somewhere else.”

“Tommy, this is our only option.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It can’t be.”

“It IS.”

“But-”

“TOMMY!” Wilbur suddenly shouted, cutting Tommy off. “If you hate my choice so much, then what do you suggest we do instead?!”

Tommy stared at him for a moment, opening and closing his mouth. When a few beats of silence passed, Wilbur scowled.

“That’s what I thought. You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, okay? I’m the one making the decisions to keep us alive right now, so why don’t you shut the *fuck* up and let me do what I need to do to keep us from getting fucking executed!” Wilbur snapped, his

voice lined with the freshly sharpened edge of a blade as he slammed his fist down on the console.

He hated snapping at Tommy. His anger was a rare thing to stoke, but sometimes Tommy knew just what buttons to push to make his threads of patience snap one by one. Wilbur was exhausted. His stomach hurt from lack of food, his throat was practically raw from how many times he'd had to use his Voice, and his head was pounding from his tears. Hearing Tommy rag on him for the only option he could see them taking was just the last straw.

Still, as soon as he saw the hurt flash over Tommy's face, his anger faded into something more manageable. He was still annoyed that Tommy was being such an asshole about this, but he knew his little brother was just as exhausted and scared as he was.

"I'm doing everything I can to keep us both alive right now, okay?" Wilbur told him through clenched teeth. "I- I don't know what I'm doing, but we've made it this far, so I think that's earned me a little bit of faith from you, okay? So don't argue with me on this. We're going to Zephys IV, and that's final."

Tommy nodded, wrapping his arms around himself as he curled back into his seat. "Fine," he huffed, although his words were shaky. "You're being a fucking asshole and I don't like when you yell at me, but fine. We'll go to Zephys IV and if we get stabbed I'm telling you I told you so."

"Fine. If we get stabbed, you can say I told you so," Wilbur relented, slumping back in his seat as he input the coordinates for the planet into the autopilot.

As the hyperdrive initiated to wormhole them across to the next system over, Wilbur couldn't help but take one last look at their planet, knowing he might never get a chance to see it again. He eyed the soft pink band that lined the center of the planet, where the day and night sides met and formed the Røkkerring. Nóttsid seemed as cold as ever with its dark, flat surface. Sólsid was a sea of shifting sands in the constant heat, rippling like an ocean as the shuttle floated by it.

Niki was still down there. The betrayal shining in her grey eyes flashed in Wilbur's mind again. She was down there, locked in her room and probably cursing Wilbur for leaving her. Even though Dream had promised the Themisians she wouldn't be hurt, would knowing that Wilbur and Tommy had successfully escaped change that? What if he did hurt Niki to try and get information out of her for where they were going? Wilbur wouldn't be able to live with himself if that happened. If Niki got hurt because of his failure to save her.

Eldingvegr blurred as the hyperdrive went into gear. As their own galaxy disappeared behind them, Wilbur wondered if he was making the right choice.

Zephys IV could be their salvation, or it could be their downfall. It all depended on what Emperor Philza decided to do with them.

Curling his hands into fists to hide the way they trembled, Wilbur forced himself to lean back in his seat. There was nothing he could do now but wait.

His life was full of waiting games lately, it seemed.

## Chapter End Notes

they are off Eldingvegr and on their way to Zephys IV... haha they are terrified. but what will they find when they get to Zephys IV??? we'll find out next chapter won't we :)

also, yes Niki got left behind. I'm going to clarify something right now, Niki in the present is not going to pop up again for possibly a really long time in the story, but she's going to be mentioned quite a bit in flashbacks so I swear I'm not trying to Niki-bait you guys lol. I really wanted to bring her along to Zephys IV, but for narrative and plot purposes it just couldn't happen

ANYWAY I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! it was a bit of a doozy to write especially with all the suspense and chase scenes, so I hope everything made sense

I have a discord server! if you wanna meet other people who read my stuff and talk about my fics when I drop new chapters or just any fic of mine in general, come join us! <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

I have a playlist for this fic (although it might be getting an overhaul soon bc florence + the machine dropped a new album so we'll see) check it out [here](#)!

in case you didn't know I'm currently also posting a collab fic I did with the lovely beautiful angelic thanotaphobia so if you wanna see us combine our writer minds check out our fic [17 hours](#)

OK THAT'S IT please leave a comment telling me what you thought of this chapter! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# meet the king pay the price

## Chapter Summary

The brothers arrive to Zephys IV.

## Chapter Notes

it's meeeeeee back with your new favorite story

god, this has to be one of the chapters i was most excited to write since i started this fic. I'm so hyped for you all to see the world of Zephys IV, and the characters that are on it :) in my mind, this is where the story truly begins

really hope you guys enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The wormhole jump from Eldingvegr to Zephys IV only took about thirty minutes. In the wake of everything that had happened to them the past few days, finally having even the smallest bit of downtime felt wrong. Despite the fact that he knew there was no way for Dream to follow them off the planet, Wilbur kept checking to make sure there was no tracking signature on the shuttle. There wasn't the first time he checked, or the second, or the third. It wasn't going to magically appear, especially not while they were going through a wormhole, but he kept checking for his own sanity anyway.

Tommy, meanwhile, spent the entire time searching the shuttle for food. This wasn't a stocked shuttle that had been ready for travel, so all he was able to find were two water bottles and a bag of nuts. But considering they'd been living off rationed water and decade old breakfast bars for the past few days, it was the equivalent of ambrosia and nectar to them both.

And then, the hyperdrive shut off. The ship jolted with the sudden stop, and when the view outside the front window came into focus, Wilbur sucked in a sharp breath.

They had stopped right above Zephys IV. Looking down on it, all Wilbur could see was ice fields spread over the entire planet. With a few taps on the console screen, Wilbur saw it was well below freezing on the surface. Just lovely.

"How the fuck does anything survive down there?" Tommy asked, stretched over the console and staring down at the planet with wide eyes.

“Really good insulation?” Wilbur guessed, although it was a weak one.

Tommy raised a doubtful eyebrow. Wilbur shrugged before turning back to look down at the planet.

“Are you sure about this, Wil?” Tommy asked after a moment, his voice precariously fragile.

No. No, Wilbur wasn’t sure about this at all. He had no idea what Emperor Philza was going to think of their asylum plea. The man was said to be ruthless and power-hungry, but he wasn’t a fool. From what Wilbur’s studies had taught him, there was no reason for Philza to kill them or hand them over to Dream. It just wouldn’t make sense.

But also, that was only based off of Wilbur’s studies. Philza could be an entirely different man when Wilbur found himself face to face with him.

That was just something he was going to have to find out on his own.

“I’m sure,” Wilbur said, hoping Tommy wouldn’t notice the way he was twisting the hem of his shirt between his fingers.

Tommy didn’t say anything in response, and Wilbur took that to mean that the lie passed through undetected. With one final breath to steady himself, Wilbur tapped a few buttons on the control console, slowly accelerating the ship down into the atmosphere of Zephyr IV.

Unlike Eldingvegr, there were no dangerously strong winds to fight against as they broke through the atmosphere of the planet. There was wind, but it was pitifully weak compared to the gales Eldingvegr could produce at the height of the windy season. Wilbur was grateful for the ease of it all, because if he had to fight to break through to Zephyr IV’s surface, it would give him all the more reason to turn the ship around and try to find another option, even when he knew there was none.

They entered a thick cloud layer, the entire view outside the shuttle’s windows turning to nothing but white void. Tommy pressed his face against the glass, warm breath clouding it as his wide eyes tried to search for any shapes in the swirling white mass. Wilbur had to rely on the instruments to know which way they were going, and continued the descent as carefully as possible.

Once they broke through the initial cloud layer, the white void cleared only to reveal a flat, white landscape that really didn’t seem all that different from the clouds. There were some jagged mounds of ice here and there, but there were no buildings Wilbur could spot. Not a single tower or even a home could be found on Zephyr IV’s surface. For a moment, Wilbur wondered if they’d somehow been directed to the wrong planet, because this place didn’t seem settled at all. It was nothing but a pure, untouched tundra.

Then, there was the sound of beeping as a message filtered through the radio.

Jumping in his seat, Wilbur halted his descent and hit the button on the radio to accept the incoming message.

“Hello? Is anyone reading me?”

It was a woman’s voice. She sounded impatient, almost annoyed that she was having to talk to them through a radio. Wilbur tensed as he pressed the button to turn on his own mic.

“Zephyr IV? This is, uh, Shuttle Seven reporting from the upper atmosphere. We read you, do you read us?”

There was a pause, and then the woman’s voice returned.

“Shuttle Seven, there is no signature attached to your tracking signal and therefore we cannot identify where you are from. State your planet and your purpose immediately.”

Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur shared a nervous look with Tommy before turning on his mic to reply. “We’re from Eldingvegr. The Essempi Empire has invaded the planet, and we’re here to request asylum.”

Another pause, much longer this time. Wilbur leaned back in his seat, wrapping his arms around himself while Tommy pulled his knees up to his chest.

Then,

“Request denied. Zephyr IV is not accepting applications for asylum at this time.”

It was as if one of the jagged pillars of ice from the surface below had fallen straight into the middle of his skull. Shit. No. They couldn’t lose this. Not when this was their only viable option.

Wilbur took a sharp breath, ignoring the panicked look Tommy was already sending his way, as he leaned forward to turn on his mic again.

“No, please, you don’t understand-”

“Listen to me, Shuttle Seven. We are not an asylum planet. If you do not exit our atmosphere immediately, you are going to be shot down.”

“I understand that but-”

“You have sixty seconds to begin your ascent out of our atmosphere.”

“Please just-”

“Fifty-nine.”

“You have to-”

“Fifty-eight.”

“Can I just-”

“Fifty-seven.”

“The Crown Prince of Eldingvegr is on this ship!” Wilbur suddenly shouted.

The counting fell silent. Wilbur waited with baited breath, shooting a terrified look at Tommy, who had uncurled himself from his ball, while his fingers dug into the arms of his seat.

“Who exactly am I speaking to?” The woman asked after a solid ten seconds of quiet.

Dragging his hands through his hair, Wilbur forced himself to straighten up despite the fact that this woman couldn’t see him. “You’re speaking to Prince Orpheus of Eldingvegr. Crown Prince Theseus is sitting right next to me. Emperor Dream has stated his intentions to execute both of us, so we are seeking asylum from the Antarctic Empire.”

Another beat. Wilbur focused on the sensation of his heart trying to claw its way out of his chest.

“Requesting permission to take remote control of your ship so that we can guide you to our landing pad?” The woman then asked, the sharp edge to her words having softened the slightest bit.

Blinking in surprise, Wilbur saw a prompt blaring across his console screen.

**Remote Control Override Requested: Accept ☐ Deny ☐**

As much as Wilbur didn’t like the idea of giving some stranger complete control over the shuttle, it wasn’t like he would know where to land otherwise. The planet seemed as empty as could be. There was nothing even close to a landing pad anywhere in sight. If this was the only way he could get down to the planet itself, then it didn’t seem like he had another choice.

**Remote Control Override Requested: Accept ☒ Deny ☐**

He pressed enter, and the ship jolted as control was taken from him. Wilbur dropped his hands from the console, sharing a nervous look with Tommy as they began to descend closer to the surface.

It was odd. One moment, all Wilbur could see on the surface of Zephys IV was flat, white ice. Then, he was able to make out a slightly darker series of lumps under the snow, and soon was able to recognize it as metal. Bright red landing signals flickered on, and Wilbur finally was able to see a circular platform embedded into the ice itself.

The shuttle landed gently against the platform with far more grace than Wilbur could’ve probably landed it with. As soon as they had touched down, the platform began to descend into the ice itself, making Wilbur and Tommy both jump in their seats.

“All of our hangars are under the ice. Once the platform stops moving, drop your ramp and exit the shuttle. I’ll be waiting for you outside.”

That was the last Wilbur heard from the woman before the radio went dead. All around the shuttle, Wilbur could see nothing but flat, grey walls as the platform dropped them deeper

and deeper beneath the ice.

“Do you think this means they’re gonna let us stay here?” Tommy whispered, clutching the arms of his chair.

“I’d like to think so, but I’m not sure,” Wilbur admitted, the inside of the shuttle lighting up with shades of red from the lights embedded into the metal walls.

Tommy clenched his jaw. “I still think this is a terrible idea.”

“Yeah, well, we’re here now so there’s not much we can do.”

The descent into the hangar took far longer than Wilbur was expecting. After Tommy fell silent, the seconds dragged on like hours as they crawled impossibly far down into the ice itself. Eventually though, the descent began to slow, and the metal tube they were inside opened up to a cavernous space.

The hangar was entirely made of metal. Smooth grey ceilings arched high above their heads in jagged patterns and shapes, as if this space had originally been an ice cavern and the metal had simply been built over top of it. Other ships were settled into different spots along the hangar, most being sleek, stealth models that Wilbur wasn’t familiar with. People in military-esque uniforms rushed around, holding tool boxes or holo-pads as they attended to different shuttles and control consoles.

The platform stopped moving so suddenly, it made Wilbur smack his head against the back of his seat. While he could see the far end of the hangar from the cockpit, he couldn’t see the ramp since that was on the back of the ship. Meaning he had no idea what was going to be waiting for them when he let the ramp drop.

This could be a mistake. If Wilbur was wrong, and Emperor Philza really was as cruel as some rumors suggested he was, he could be walking his little brother straight to his death. But he wasn’t lying when he told Tommy they had no other options. There was quite literally nowhere else for them to go.

*In for four, out for eight. Rinse and repeat until the waves stop crashing in your head.*

The familiar mantra floated through Wilbur’s mind again, and he took a moment to shut his eyes and breathe along with the counting. The waves lapped at the corners of his thoughts, begging him to dive under the surface and drown with his anxieties. But he focused on counting, on quieting the waves until they were little more than seafoam.

His shoulders slumped. While things weren’t okay, he wasn’t going to find out how fucked they were until they got out of the shuttle.

Opening his eyes again, Wilbur reached out a hand towards Tommy, who took it without hesitation. “Let’s go see what we’re up against.”

Squeezing his fingers, Tommy nodded as he pushed to his feet. “Yeah, let’s go.”



The two walked through the shuttle, keeping their hands tightly interlaced as the ramp lowered onto the platform itself. A blast of icy air hit them as they stood in front of the opening, and Tommy shivered, wrapping his free arm around himself while Wilbur kept his arms at his sides—determined to brave the cold.

Sharing one more look, the two took a breath in at the same time, before walking down the ramp.

There was a squad of Zephys guards waiting for them at the bottom. Four guards in dark uniforms made of thick fabric that shimmered ever so slightly, long pants and coats that fell all the way to their ankles, with large belts tied around their waists. In front of the four guards was a short woman with a wild head of curls that fell to her mid-back. Her hair was split brown and white right down the center and her uniform was similar to the guards behind her, but instead of pants she wore a skirt that fell to her calves, and the accents around her belt were silver instead of black.

Wilbur also noticed the woman had large horns curling over her ears and behind her head. Huh. She was an ovee then. Considering the guards behind her were human, he wondered if there were more ovees on Zephys IV, or if she was just an outlier.

He didn't have time to think about that for too long however, because as soon as he and Tommy got to the bottom of the ramp, she held out a hand to stop them.

"State your names, please," she said, and Wilbur recognized her voice as the one on the radio.

Stiffening, Wilbur gave Tommy a pointed look. Since he was the Crown Prince, he had to introduce himself first in any given situation. For a moment though, Tommy seemed to forget this, and stood there frozen in silence.

When Wilbur nudged him though, he startled and bowed his head.

"Theseus, Crown Prince of Eldingvegr," Tommy introduced, bowing stiffly while not letting go of Wilbur's hand.

The woman's eyebrows raised in surprise, but she didn't say anything as she turned her grey-green eyes to Wilbur.

"Prince Orpheus of Eldingvegr," Wilbur said, bowing just a tad more gracefully than Tommy.

Her eyes sharpened when he said that. "You're the one I was speaking to over the comms."

Wilbur nodded. "Yes. I was piloting the shuttle."

Strangely, her expression softened at this, but it was such a subtle shift that Wilbur almost thought he imagined it. "I'm the Captain of Zephys IV's Royal Guard. The Emperor wishes to speak with you both, so I'll be escorting you to him."

"Is he going to grant us asylum here?" Tommy asked suddenly.

The Captain shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. He'll make the call once he meets you."

Great. That really didn't help them at all.

Still, Wilbur nodded in acknowledgement at that. "We appreciate the Emperor taking time out of his busy schedule to speak with us and hear our request."

Instead of responding to that, the Captain just huffed out something that could've been a laugh. Then, she turned on the heel of her heavy boots, and the guards behind her fanned out to circle around them. "Follow me."

Wilbur and Tommy still didn't let go of each other's hands as they followed the Captain through the hangar and away from their shuttle. Before they left the hangar entirely, Wilbur glanced back at the ship, and was surprised to see the ramp had been closed. No one was going near it, which *could* mean they weren't going to confiscate it. If their request did get denied, the hope was that they would just let the two of them leave the planet without any trouble, but they couldn't do that without their ship.

Leaving the hangar, the all metal walls changed to a mish-mash of solid ice and metal paneling. The ceiling was ridiculously tall, even as the walls narrowed in on either side of them to something resembling a normal hallway. More soldiers in dark blue military fatigues hurried around them, and Wilbur noted that while the majority of the soldiers were humans, there were several oves along with a few other species in their ranks. There were a few avians who had holes cut in the backs of their shirts for small wings, and a handful of enderians whose uniforms must've been specially tailored for their excessive height.

The last time Wilbur had seen so many different species in a single place was a conference that had been held between several of the planets Eldingvegr was aligned with a few years back. Zephys IV seemed to be more of a melting pot of different populations. If he wasn't currently worried for his life, he would be trying to ask the Captain questions about the history of the planet itself. But there were more important things to focus on, and he was pretty sure that even if he did ask, the Captain wouldn't answer him anyway.

The hallway eventually opened up again to something resembling a terminal station. Several trains floating over mag-lev tracks were lined up on different rails, with soldiers carrying shipment crates either in or out of them. There was one train near the far end of the terminal that didn't have any crates being loaded into it, and looked much cleaner than the others as well.

The metal doors to the train slid open automatically as the Captain stepped inside, gesturing for Wilbur and Tommy to follow. Their entourage of guards joined them as well, and once inside Wilbur saw comfortable-looking train seats lining the walls.

The guards pointed where the two of them could sit. Tommy took the one closer to the window, while Wilbur sat on the outside, tilting his body ever so slightly so Tommy was shielded behind him. The Captain sat on the seats across from them, folding her hands in front of her as the rest of the guards remained standing.

With a loud jolt, the train car began to move. Wilbur stiffened, squeezing Tommy's hand and narrowing his eyes at the Captain.

“This will take us to the palace,” the Captain explained. “It should only take a few minutes.”

Nodding, Wilbur forced himself to relax back into his seat, letting out a long breath between his teeth. Tommy pressed closer to his side, but kept his eyes focused on the window as they rode through another metal tunnel.

The train went completely dark for just a moment. Then, the tunnel opened up, and Wilbur’s eyes widened as he was hit with the realization of *why* he hadn’t been able to see any structures on Zephyr IV from the sky.

There was a sprawling, dense city laid out underneath the ice of Zephyr IV. The railway the train was riding along was set above the city proper, giving them a perfect view of the stone and metal towers that were all crowded together in a stunning example of innovation and industrialization.

Above their heads, Wilbur could see long, deadly sharp ice spikes dangling right over the towering buildings. The sky was completely covered by thick layers of white and blue ice, and Wilbur realized the city must’ve been built into a naturally formed ice cavern.

Sitting at the top of the city along what must’ve been some natural ice mound was what Wilbur could only guess was the royal palace. The structure was all harsh lines and dark metal—creating a sharp contrast between itself and the smooth, curved lines of the ice cavern walls.

Seeming as though his nerves were momentarily forgotten, Tommy pressed his face against the glass, cheeks squished and eyes blown wide as he stared in awe at the city as they rode above it. Wilbur couldn’t help but do the same, laying half on top of Tommy to get a better view.

It was amazing, but terrifying at the same time. The city was awe-inspiring to look at, so different from the intricately carved towers that dotted the Røkkerring. But where Eldingvegr was a planet of snow white marble and rosy skies, Zephyr IV was a planet of black metal and frigid blue ice. Where Eldingvegr had soft edges, Zephyr IV had jagged ridges. Beautiful, but wholly unfamiliar in every possible way.

“Holy shit,” Wilbur whispered, his chin resting on top of Tommy’s head where both their foreheads were pressed against the window.

“Yeah, *fuck*,” Tommy whispered in reply.

Behind them, there was the sound of quiet snickering, and both boys stiffened as they remembered they weren’t alone. Wilbur threw himself back into his own seat, while Tommy pulled away from the window and curled into Wilbur’s side.

Wilbur glanced at the Captain, who wasn’t smiling, but had something like amusement glittering in her eyes. “It’s impressive, I know,” she said, gesturing to the window.

A part of Wilbur wanted to ask the Captain if the cavern was natural, or if they had carved the space out themselves. Because it certainly looked natural, but the cavern was large enough to

hold an entire city, and Wilbur wasn't sure if it was possible for any single cave to be that large. He also wanted to ask about the ice spikes dangling from above—was it a safety hazard? Had they ever broken off and fallen onto the city itself before? If not, were they worried about it as a possibility?

But this wasn't a casual visit to another planet where Wilbur could pester guards and servants with all the questions that burned in his mind. Their lives were very much still in danger. For all Wilbur knew, they could be laying themselves right down on a guillotine. So he shoved down the questions bubbling up inside of him, and simply let out a small hum before glancing towards the window again.

Looking ahead on the rails, Wilbur quickly realized the train would take them straight inside the palace. The looming structure got closer and closer, and soon they were leaving the city behind and passing into a small tunnel on one side—Wilbur briefly mourned the loss of the view, but knew they had more important things to focus on.

There was a train platform very similar to the one they'd boarded the train at. There were less soldiers in the blue military fatigues here though, and more wearing the dark, shimmering uniforms that the Captain and her guards were dressed in. Wilbur supposed that must be to differentiate the palace guards from the standard soldiers.

The train came to a smooth stop. The Captain pushed to her feet, gesturing for Wilbur and Tommy to get up as well. They both awkwardly shuffled out of their seats, the guards fanning around them once more as the Captain led them off the train and onto the platform.

A few of the palace guards that were stationed around the platform gave the brothers surprised looks as they walked by, but none vocalized any confusion or concern, instead just dipping their heads in respect to the Captain when she glanced their way.

There was a chill in the air as they left the platform behind and entered a long, arching hallway. The floor turned to smooth stone, the guards' boots all loudly clicking against it while Wilbur and Tommy's socks were silent in comparison. The metal walls had been polished to something much more refined than the dull, jagged metal that had decorated the walls of the hangar. But besides that, there weren't many signs of opulence inside the palace.

There were no decorations hanging on the walls. No paintings or carvings or even windows lining the halls. It was smooth, dark, and cold. Both in the metaphorical and the literal sense. An icy chill hung in the air, and although it was tolerable, it wasn't anything close to pleasant for Wilbur and Tommy in their thin pajamas. Now Wilbur understood why all the guards wore such thick uniforms.

Unlike the palace on Eldingvegr, this place didn't have nearly as many twists and turns to it. They had to make a few rights and lefts here and there, but it was easy for Wilbur to remember the route back to the train platform. Then, after only a few minutes of walking through the palace, they reached a set of huge, black doors that stretched all the way to the ridiculously high ceiling.

"Is the Emperor ready to see them?" The Captain asked one of the guards in front of the tall doors.

The guard nodded. “Both he and the Emperor are waiting.”

The Captain nodded, before turning around to face the two of them. “Don’t speak until you’re granted permission, understood?”

Tommy shot Wilbur a worried look, but Wilbur just nodded, and after a beat of hesitation, Tommy did the same. The Captain narrowed her eyes as she looked them both over, before turning on her heel and nodding for the guards to open the doors.

The doors slid open with a soft hiss. Wilbur’s heart pounded a rapid staccato against his ribs, and he squeezed Tommy’s hand as the Captain led them into what he could only guess was the throne room.

There wasn’t much about the throne room that was very different from the rest of the palace. It had the same stone floors, a few dark stone pillars here and there, and one wall to the left that was made entirely of glass and looked out onto the city itself. At the front of the room there was a slightly raised platform, and it was there that Wilbur saw Emperor Philza seated on a simple, metal throne.

Wilbur wasn’t sure what he had been expecting when he imagined Emperor Philza, but one thing was for certain: he hadn’t known the man was Elytrian.

Huge, dark wings spread out behind Emperor Philza. He was wearing something similar to a cloak that was a shade of deep blue, but it was cut in a way so that it wrapped around the back of his neck and left his shoulders bare, presumably to leave space for the wings. He was also wearing a sleeveless, dark button up shirt underneath the cloak, and on his shoulders Wilbur could see smaller black feathers dotting his skin here and there—almost like freckles.

It should’ve been impossible for Emperor Philza to be Elytrian. To Wilbur’s knowledge, the planet of Elytra had been wiped out over a century prior. But avian wings never grew that large. Only an Elytrian could have wings like Emperor Philza did.

There was another man standing beside the Emperor. Immediately, Wilbur took note of the small tusks poking out from his lips, and the bright pink hair he had pulled back in a complicated series of braids—a piglin. He wore a long, thick coat that fell to his calves that was belted at the waist and a similar shade of dark blue to the cloak the Emperor wore. Both were decorated with subtle silver embroidery. A mark of their rankings, perhaps?

So distracted by the realization that the Emperor of the Antarctic Empire was an Elytrian, and by the mysterious piglin beside him, Wilbur almost missed it when the Captain stepped forward, bowing her head before meeting Philza’s gaze.

“Your Majesty,” she said to Philza, before turning to the piglin, “Your Imperial Highness, I have brought the princes as requested.”

The Emperor and the piglin both nodded at her in acknowledgement, and she bowed once more before turning on her heel and leaving the throne room. Wilbur’s breath caught in his throat as he watched her go, because even though he was terrified of her, she was at least somewhat less intimidating than Philza and whoever the piglin beside him was.

The doors slid open with another hiss, and the Captain disappeared behind them. When they had shut again, Wilbur realized that besides the guards inside the throne room, they were alone with the Emperor.

He took a shaky breath as he faced the throne once more. The Captain said not to speak until they were given permission, so he kept his lips pressed in a firm line, and could only hope Tommy was doing the same.

Silence hung over the room—a taut string just waiting to be cut. Philza’s eyes were the same shade of blue as the ice above their heads, and his gaze was just as cold as he looked both Wilbur and Tommy up and down. Beside him, the piglin did the same, with bright gold eyes that reminded Wilbur of the gold jewelry Eret had always adorned himself with.

After over a full minute of silence, Philza spoke.

“State your names,” he said, and Wilbur was startled because he had been expecting the man to have a much deeper voice. It carried a sharp accent as well, one that was reminiscent to both his and Tommy’s, but still different at the same time.

Glancing to his left, Wilbur raised his eyebrows at Tommy. When Tommy clenched his jaw, Wilbur squeezed his hand again, and Tommy took a deep breath to steady himself. Then, he let go of Wilbur’s hand, and stepped forward into a deep bow.

“My name is Theseus Thomas Ióni, Crown Prince of Eldingvegr,” he introduced, his voice wavering as he said his name. Despite his nerves, Wilbur couldn’t help the small bit of pride that bloomed inside of him at the fact that Tommy had remembered the proper court etiquette of saying his full name to another monarch.

After a beat, Tommy straightened up from the bow and stepped back beside Wilbur. Then, Philza’s eyes turned to him, and Wilbur felt his heart skip a beat.

Okay. His turn.

The same as Tommy, Wilbur stepped forward into a deep bow. “Orpheus Wilbur Sóti, Prince of Eldingvegr.” His voice didn’t waver like Tommy’s did, even though he could barely feel his legs with how badly they were shaking.

When he straightened up and returned to Tommy’s side again, he noticed the Emperor giving him an odd look. There was a ghost of a smile on his face, but it wasn’t anything close to friendly. No, it was the smile of a cat watching a mouse.

“Prince Orpheus,” Philza began, startling Wilbur, “how old are you?”

“Nineteen, Your Majesty,” Wilbur answered, reaching for Tommy’s hand again.

Philza hummed, before his eyes flickered to Tommy. “And how old are you, Prince Theseus?”

Tommy gulped. “Fifteen.”

The smile grew on his face. “And yet you’re the Crown Prince, not your brother.” He paused, looking back to Wilbur. “Prince Orpheus, are you a bastard?”

A rock lodged itself in his throat at the obvious taunt in his words. Schooling his expression into a mask of neutrality, Wilbur nodded. “Yes, I am.”

Like a knife sliding across a whet stone, the edges of Philza’s smile sharpened even more. His barking laugh rang out across the throne room, jabbing into Wilbur’s chest like shards of ice. He squeezed Tommy’s hand so hard, he had to have been hurting him, but Tommy didn’t make any moves to pull his hand away.

“How interesting,” Philza commented once he had stopped laughing, his icy gaze still fixed on Wilbur. Another beat passed. Wilbur forced himself to loosen his grip on Tommy’s hand.

Then,

“I suppose we should introduce ourselves properly as well,” Philza then said, rising to his feet. His feathers ruffled with the movement, and they stretched above his head as he dipped into a low bow of his own. “I’m Philza, Emperor of the Antarctic Empire.”

Wilbur eyed the dark metal circlet that rested on his pale blonde hair, wondering if it was going to slip off when he dipped his head. The circlet stayed in place though, and after a moment, the Emperor straightened up and returned to his seat before looking at the piglin.

“Go on, mate. They probably have no clue who you are.”

The piglin huffed, as if he was annoyed at having to introduce himself. “Technoblade, Imperator of the Antarctic Empire,” he said in a gruff voice, bowing his head at the two of them but nothing else.

Ah. This was the military commander of the Empire. With Technoblade’s broad shoulders and hulking frame, Wilbur could only imagine how terrifying of a force he must’ve been in battles. Along with this, now that Wilbur was properly looking at the Imperator, he could see that it wasn’t just his eyes that were gold. There was a gold ring settled in his nose, and his pointed ears were lined with gold studs and chains. From the little Wilbur knew of piglins, he was decently sure there was some connection between them and gold, but he didn’t know much more than that.

“So.” Philza’s voice startled Wilbur out of his thoughts, “from what I’ve been told, you are both requesting the Antarctic Empire grant you asylum.” His eyes flickered between Wilbur and Tommy. “Do you care to explain why?”

Glancing at Tommy, Wilbur nudged his shoulder, giving him a pointed look. Again, court etiquette demanded that Tommy be the one to explain this situation, not Wilbur. Tommy paled as he realized this, but straightened his shoulders to meet Emperor Philza’s gaze head on.

“We- We were attacked,” Tommy began, and Wilbur winced at his stammer. “We were betrayed by Eret- I mean the King Regent, and they sold us out to-”

“Prince Theseus, no offense, but I think it might be a bit easier if Prince Orpheus explains the situation to us instead,” Technoblade suddenly said, cutting Tommy off. Beside him, Philza nodded in agreement.

Tommy flushed in embarrassment, while Wilbur’s eyes widened. This wasn’t court etiquette, but if the Emperor and the Imperator wanted him to be the one to explain the situation, he couldn’t say no.

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Wilbur looked between Philza and Technoblade, before meeting Philza’s eyes directly. “The Essempi Empire has launched an attack on Eldingvegr. Our King Regent gave Emperor Dream secret information that allowed him to ambush us. They struck an agreement for Eldingvegr to come under the control of Essempi, in exchange for the King Regent getting to keep their title instead of passing it down to my brother when he turns eighteen.” He took another breath, his voice growing more steady the longer he spoke. “Emperor Dream attempted to execute us both. We managed to steal a shuttle and barely escaped with our lives.”

Philza nodded at this, a crease forming between his brows when Wilbur brought up Dream. “So Dream’s trying to take over the blaziphane trade then, huh?” He huffed out a half-laugh. “Arrogant prick. Of course he’d go for the wealthiest planet in the entire damn galaxy. It hasn’t even been five years since he was crowned, no?”

“No,” Technoblade answered. “He was crowned three years ago.”

Philza hummed. “I suppose that poses a problem for us. If Dream holds a monopoly on blaziphane, he’ll make it next to impossible for the Antarctic Empire to get.” Then, he paused, glancing back at Wilbur. “Though I’m sure you’ve thought of that already, haven’t you, Prince Orpheus?”

Wilbur stiffened. “I- I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Don’t play dumb. My Captain told me you were the one piloting the shuttle from Eldingvegr, so I’d wager you’re the one who chose to come here for help. Not Prince Theseus.”

The lump in his throat grew bigger, and Tommy pressed closer to his side.

“What exactly are you asking me?” Wilbur said in as careful of a tone as he could manage.

Philza tilted his head to the side, and it reminded Wilbur so much of a bird, it was almost eerie. “Why did you choose to ask the Antarctic Empire for asylum? You could’ve hidden out on any planet in the far reaches, the ones that are filled with misfits from all over the galaxy, and yet you came *here*. Why?”

“It... It seemed like the most logical choice.”

“Because you knew that Dream wouldn’t be able to hunt you down if he knew you were under our protection?” Philza asked, raising an eyebrow. “Or was it because you know that our military is the only one that can stand against the Essempi Empire? Because you knew



that if I found out Dream was taking control of the blaziphane trade, I might be willing to help you get your planet back?”

Fuck. While Wilbur hadn't been planning to bring it up in this conversation, that had certainly been in the back of his mind when he chose Zephyrs IV as their destination. He just hadn't been expecting Philza to recognize it so fast.

“Am I wrong?” Wilbur asked, forcing himself to keep his chin high even under the weight of both Philza and Technoblade's stares.

Beside him, Tommy shot him a sharp look. In his eyes, Wilbur could read the silent question of *what the fuck are you doing?* as clear as day. He gave Tommy a small nod, hoping that was enough reassurance for his brother despite the anxiety crawling up his own throat.

When he turned back to Philza, the man's sharp smile had returned. Wilbur didn't have the slightest clue whether that was a good or bad thing.

“Your logic is sound, Prince Orpheus. I'm not an idiot. Getting locked out of the blaziphane trade would be disastrous for the Antarctic Empire,” Philza told him, his wings rustling as he leaned further back on his throne. “But if we were to assist you in reclaiming your planet from Dream, there would need to be something in it for us.”

“You would still be able to buy blaziphane. Isn't that enough?” Tommy suddenly cut in, his words far too sharp for this kind of conversation.

Wilbur squeezed Tommy's hand as hard as he could at that, making him wince and try to pull away. But Wilbur didn't let go, instead staring him down and hoping that Tommy got the message to shut the fuck up before he got them killed.

Philza, to Wilbur's surprise, laughed again. “I don't know, Prince Theseus. Is simply being able to buy blaziphane enough to risk our own troops against Essempi's? If we're driving Essempi out, why wouldn't we just take over Eldingvegr for ourselves? Then the Antarctic Empire would have a complete monopoly over blaziphane. That's a lot better than just being able to buy the damn stuff.”

“But you wouldn't have anyone to rule Eldingvegr,” Wilbur pointed out before Tommy could say something even snappier. “The minute you began an attack, Dream would likely kill Eret—the King Regent—to make sure there wasn't a ruler you could pin up as your puppet. Even if Eret did survive, they're not a proper heir. You would still be running a risk because Eldingvegr has been run by the same bloodline for centuries. I don't think our people would take kindly to that bloodline being tossed aside in favor of a foreign, imperial rule.”

“Maybe that's a risk we're willing to take,” Technoblade then chimed in, narrowing his golden eyes at the brothers.

“But it's not one you *need* to take,” Wilbur countered. “Not when you have Tom- Prince Theseus, the heir to the throne right here.”

This time, Philza's smile was all teeth, and somehow even more threatening than before. "And that's exactly what I'm getting at. I'm willing to offer you both asylum, but if you want the Antarctic Empire's help with reclaiming Eldingvegr, we're going to have to have some negotiations first." His eyes then slid over to Tommy. "Prince Theseus, since you're the heir, it's your decision to make."

"If you want a minute alone so your brother can tell you what to do, we can arrange that," Technoblade added, raising an eyebrow in silent challenge at Tommy.

Wilbur clenched his jaw as Tommy's face turned bright red. "I don't need my brother to tell me what to do. We'll negotiate with you, you fucking—"

Grabbing Tommy's shoulder, Wilbur leaned down next to his ear. "Shut the fuck up before you get us killed!" Wilbur whisper-hissed into his ear.

"You might wanna learn to watch your tongue a bit more," Technoblade then huffed. "Like, we have no real obligation to keep you two around. We could kill you if we wanted."

Great. They'd gotten a death threat. This was going perfectly.

"Techno, mate, chill out. These royal kids are usually so well-trained. It's nice to see he's got a bit of fire in him," Philza told him, smirking at the two of them.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes, but forced himself to swallow down his own rising anger. "So we'll negotiate?"

Philza nodded. "We will. But negotiations take time, and to be blunt, you two look pretty goddamn awful so we're definitely not going to start them today."

Standing from his throne again, he then waved at the guards near the doors, and Wilbur heard them open with another soft hiss. Then, there was the sound of boots against stone, and the Captain reappeared at their side.

"Puffy, the princes are going to be staying with us for a little while. Will you please show them to the guest wing?" Philza ordered.

The Captain—Puffy, apparently—bowed her head. "Understood, Your Majesty."

Then, Technoblade added, "Also, make sure someone brings them food. I keep thinkin' one of them is gonna pass out and I don't wanna get blood on the floor."

Puffy nodded. "I'll inform the servants." With that, she turned to both of them and waved for them to follow her.

Wilbur hesitated, glancing back over his shoulder at Philza and Technoblade. For a brief moment, he met Philza's eyes, and then Tommy was tugging him along, and he was led out of the throne room.

As soon as the doors to the throne room shut behind them, Tommy just about collapsed into Wilbur's side, and Wilbur wrapped an arm around his shoulders to pull him close. Puffy

paused when she noticed they weren't following her, and Wilbur expected her to tell them to hurry up.

Instead, she just stayed silent as the two of them hugged. Wilbur rested his chin on Tommy's head, and could feel Tommy's rapid heartbeat pounding against his own chest. Tommy was shaking nearly as badly as Wilbur was, and he frankly had no idea how they made it through that as well as they did.

They stayed like that for another minute, before Wilbur pulled away. Once they got to their room they could both lay down and think about what just happened. But they still had a little ways to go.

Puffy didn't say anything when they started walking again. But there was no annoyance on her face. Instead, there was just quiet understanding.

The guest wing wasn't terribly far from the throne room. The palace as a whole seemed much smaller than Eldingvegr's, which Wilbur didn't mind because that just made it easier for him to navigate. They came across rows of black doors, and Puffy silently mouthed numbers to herself as she eyed each door they passed.

She stopped in front of one and tapped a button on the keypad beside it. The door slid open with a soft *whoosh*, and then she turned back to both of them.

"Prince Orpheus, this is your room. Prince Theseus, yours will be a little down-"

"No," Wilbur and Tommy said at the same time, cutting her off.

Puffy paused, frowning at them. "No?"

Wilbur shook his head. "We stay in the same room."

Tommy, who had wrapped himself around Wilbur's arm, nodded in agreement.

There was no fucking way Wilbur was letting Tommy stay in a different room than him. Not when Technoblade had so casually pointed out how easy it would be to kill them. Not when they had already nearly died ten times over just in the past few days.

Philza might be offering them asylum, but that didn't mean Wilbur trusted him. Clearly, Tommy felt the same way.

Again, Wilbur expected some sign of annoyance from Puffy. But she surprised him once more when she only nodded and gestured to the door. "Alright then. I'll tell the servants to bring both your meals here then. There should be some clothes in the wardrobe as well, but they might be too short on you, Prince Orpheus. We can have some proper clothes tailored for you both in a few days, but they'll work for the time being."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Wilbur dipped his head at her. "Thank you, Captain."

"Just doing my job," she said, although there was a hint of a smile on her face. "If you need anything, there's a servant call button on the wall."

“When are we gonna see the Emperor again?” Tommy suddenly asked.

Puffy’s faint smile disappeared as quickly as it appeared. “I’m not sure. Emperor Philza and Imperator Technoblade are both very busy men, but I’d imagine you’ll have another meeting with them in the next few days.”

Tommy frowned but didn’t say anything at that. Wilbur, who was already starting to sway now that the adrenaline of fearing for his life was wearing off once more, took a step inside the room. “Thanks again, Captain.”

She nodded and took a step back as Tommy followed Wilbur into the room. “Get some rest. You’re both certainly going to need it.”

And with that, the door slid shut, leaving Tommy and Wilbur alone.

Puffy’s words hung in the air like the ice spikes that hung from the ceiling of the cavern outside the palace walls. A silent threat. A warning of the disaster that might come.

But for now... they were safe. They were the safest they’d been in days. Dream couldn’t get them here. No one was actively trying to kill them.

Holy shit. They were *alive*. Despite all odds, Wilbur had kept them both alive.

The realization hit him all at once. That for this brief moment, it was over. That Tommy was safe. That he was safe.

The weight of this turned Wilbur’s legs to jelly as he slumped against the wall, sliding down to the ground and burying his face in his hands. His chest was aching and he felt like all of his insides had been hollowed out. He was relieved. He was exhausted. He was numb.

He didn’t even realize he was crying until he felt liquid on his hands. Distantly, he heard rustling, before cold hands were tugging on his wrists and forcing him to look up.

“Wil?” Tommy whispered, his voice cracking in a way that made him sound far younger than he was. “Are you okay?”

“We’re alive,” Wilbur laughed through his tears, unsure if the bubbles in his chest were mania or euphoria. “We’re fucking *alive*, Tommy.”

“Yeah, we’re alive,” Tommy nodded, giving him a small smile. “That stupid green bitch won’t find us here.”

Wilbur huffed out something between a laugh and a sob at that. “Green?”

“His soldier’s uniforms have that ugly ass shade of green on them,” Tommy explained.

Snorting, Wilbur nodded. “I get it. Yeah, he’s a green bitch.”

A moment of silence passed between them as their smiles faded. Another half-sob made Wilbur’s chest shudder, and Tommy frowned.

“Okay, c’mon, get up,” he said, grabbing Wilbur’s hand and pushing to his feet. “We’re not gonna sit on the fucking floor when there’s a perfectly good bed right over there.”

Oh fuck. A bed. They’d been sleeping in a small, cramped room for the past few days. The idea of stretching out on a mattress made Wilbur want to cry.

Well, he was already crying. But laying on a bed made him want to cry even more.

Letting Tommy pull him to his feet, the two of them shuffled over to the bed. The room itself wasn’t ridiculously large, but it wasn’t cramped either. There was a large bed made up with black and blue blankets, along with a few sitting chairs, a desk shoved against one wall, and a sleek fireplace on the opposite side of the room from the bed.

Because of the chill in the air, a part of Wilbur was tempted to go light the fireplace now. But he was also far too exhausted to do anything but lay down, and figured he could just wrap himself up in blankets for the time being.

Wilbur fell face first onto the mattress, letting out a low moan at how it cradled all of the sore spots in his body. The mattress dipped as Tommy did the same beside him, and the two just laid face down side by side on the bed for a moment, relishing in the simple comfort of having a real bed again.

More tears welled up in Wilbur’s eyes. He let out another laugh-sob before rolling over to bury his face in Tommy’s chest. He wasn’t even fully crying or having a sobbing breakdown. He was too tired for that. Instead, he just continued to laugh quietly as tears streamed down his cheeks. Maybe he was hysterical, or having some kind of relief-induced breakdown, but he didn’t care. All he cared about was that they were alive.

Tommy wrapped his arms around Wilbur and started absently combing his fingers through his hair. Normally, Wilbur wouldn’t let Tommy comfort him like this. He’d force himself to calm down because he had to take care of his little brother, not the other way around.

But Wilbur was just too tired for that. Way too fucking tired. So he just stayed like that.

Neither one said anything the entire time. They didn’t need to.

In the end, Wilbur fell asleep like that until a servant knocked on the door with two trays of some strange looking roasted meat and vegetables neither of them recognized. The power of his rumbling stomach overrode his exhaustion, and the two of them practically inhaled their plates. The food was surprisingly good, although they both ate so fast Wilbur doubted either one tasted it very much.

Once that was done, Wilbur told Tommy he could use the shower first since he knew neither of them had to smell very good. While Tommy was showering, Wilbur figured out how to light the fireplace (thanks to an easy to use control panel right beside it), and soon the chill in the air had disappeared thanks to the flickering orange flames.

After Tommy got out of the shower, with bags under his eyes and his curls dark and wet against his forehead, Wilbur took his turn and practically doused himself in burning water. It

felt so good to wash away the grime of the crawlspace off his skin, to try and rid himself of the past few days like they were nothing but a bad dream.

Obviously, that wasn't true. The soap didn't smell the same, the water had a strange metallic taste to it when it accidentally got in Wilbur's mouth, and the shower head was just a bit too low for him so he had to bend down to get his hair wet. But if he closed his eyes for just a moment, he could almost pretend he was back home.

By the time Wilbur walked out of the bathroom in the rather simple but still soft pajamas that he'd found in the closet, Tommy had already passed out on the bed. He was holding a pillow to his chest like a stuffed toy, and Wilbur made sure to turn the lights in the room off before he carefully crawled into the bed beside him.

Despite his efforts, Tommy still cracked one eye open as Wilbur laid down. "Took you long enough, bitch," he slurred out, his voice muffled by the pillow shoved on his face.

"Go back to sleep, gremlin," Wilbur whispered, rolling onto his other side so he was facing the wall. "Tiny children need their rest."

Tommy made an angry noise at that, but was too tired to argue against it. Instead, Wilbur felt a weak punch against his back, and snorted as he let his eyes flutter shut.

Then, there was a more solid weight against him when Tommy pressed his forehead against his back. He still had the pillow in his arms so that was also awkwardly shoved between them, but Wilbur didn't mind. After the terror of the past few days, just knowing Tommy was right behind him was a silent comfort in itself.

While Wilbur had no idea what the next few days were going to bring, they were alive for now. And that was enough.

## Chapter End Notes

lmaoooo not what a lot of you were expecting, eh?

fun times up ahead with power plays and negotiations coming in full swing. i'm very excited to show you guys more of characters on zephyr iv (we'll be seeing more familiar faces next chapter), and also get more interaction with both phil and techno because they are very fun characters in this.

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

there's a playlist for this fic :) it has taken all of my willpower not to just dump like ten florence + the machine songs on there because that's become my go to music to listen to while i write this. check it out [here](#)

please please please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <33

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# familiarity in a strange land

## Chapter Summary

The boys have their first full day at the palace.

## Chapter Notes

hello everyone!! I'm back!

managed to finish this right before finals week starts, which I think is pretty great timing. don't expect any updates from me for the next few days, i'm literally going into my last finals of my entire college career? your local fic author is gonna be graduating soon!

also bc I gave my creative writing prof my ao3, hi professor. if you're reading this, ngl this story is pretty cool and I've been using a lot of the tools you taught us for worldbuilding stuff with this one :)

anyway, this is a very fun chapter where we get to meet several more characters! I really hope you guys enjoy"! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Wind blasted Wilbur's face as the hangar doors slid shut, the shuttle setting down on the metal landing pad with practiced ease. Beside him, Tommy whimpered at the loud noise, burying his face into Eret's shoulder to hide from it.*

*"Stand up straight," Eret gently reminded him, squeezing his shoulder as Wilbur straightened his back.*

*Biting back a grumble, Wilbur picked at the edge of his coat. It was stiff, the coarse fabric itching his arms. The tassels that decorated the formal coat were rustled by the wind, and Wilbur tried not to think of how grating it was to hear the faint clicks of metal hitting against each other.*

*He didn't understand why they had to get so dressed up for this. Eret was in one of their fanciest gowns—bright red and billowing out around their hips like a cloud. In their arms, they were holding Tommy, who was also dolled up in a miniature version of the same suit jacket Wilbur was wearing. He hated it just as much as Wilbur, babbling complaints in a mixture of actual words and baby talk.*



*For now though, he was quiet. Eret was as well, holding him against their hip with one arm, keeping their other firmly on Wilbur's shoulder. As the ramp to the shuttle lowered, Wilbur took a shaky breath.*

*According to Eret, after hearing of their mother's death, the Themisians decided to send a group of diplomats to stay on Eldingvegr for the foreseeable future. It was part of their agreement so they could keep an eye on both Tommy and Wilbur. He didn't know why the Themisians would want to keep an eye on either of them, but it wasn't like he had a say in the matter.*

*Also according to Eret, the Themisians were bringing an emissary with them as well—which apparently was a special title given to someone being sent on a diplomatic mission. Wilbur didn't know what their mission was going to be, but Eret warned the emissary was going to be charged with following both him and Tommy, and Wilbur was already dreading having some random adult keeping an eye on him and his brother at all times.*

*The ramp reached the bottom of the landing pad. The guards beside them saluted, and a group of women began to exit the ship.*

*The women reminded Wilbur of his mother—with fin-like ears and scales dotting their webbed fingers. Each one had a veil made of thin, silver chains resting on the top of her head, and more chains twisted over the tops of their colorful dresses like armor. He had to admit, that was pretty cool.*

*None of the women smiled as their bright eyes looked both him and Tommy over. As they began to fan out into a line in front of them though, Wilbur noticed another Themisian who had been hidden behind the others.*

*She was a kid. Possibly even the same age as Wilbur. Her chain veil didn't just cover her hair but also her face, and through the gaps Wilbur could make out silver eyes and hair that was almost the same shade of pink as the twilight sky outside. Her head was bowed, and Wilbur couldn't stop himself from wondering who she was.*

*Once all the women had lined up, Eret bowed as best they could with Tommy in their arms.*

*"As King Regent, I welcome the Ambassadors of the Order of Anthemoessa to Eldingvegr," they said, giving the women a kind smile.*

*The woman at the front did not smile back. Instead, she glanced between Wilbur and Tommy, narrowing her eyes. "These are the sons?"*

*Eret nodded. "Yes, this is Crown Prince Theseus Thomas Íóni," they said, gesturing to Tommy. "And then..." they trailed off, giving Wilbur a look telling him to introduce himself.*

*Stepping forward, Wilbur bowed, although it was stiff. "Prince Orpheus Wilbur Sóti," he said, wincing when he tripped over the accent in Sóti.*

*"Where did Sóti come from? The name your mother gave you is Orpheus Wilbur," the Themisian woman told him, her tone sharp.*

*“The late king gave him the name Sóti when he first arrived here with his mother,” Eret hastily explained. “It’s an Eldingvegr name.”*

*“Of course,” the woman sneered, not bothering to hide her distaste for that in the slightest. “If the child was a girl, Queen Myrina would likely take issue with a daughter of Themis being tainted with a foreign name like that. But he’s only a son, so we can let it be.”*

*Wilbur kept his eyes on the ground. Eret squeezed his shoulder again.*

*“I’m glad that’s not an issue,” Eret said after a moment, their voice tight. “I was told there was an Emissary being brought along on this trip?”*

*The woman’s narrowed eyes softened, and she turned around, gesturing for the young girl to step forward. The girl did, blinking rapidly behind her veil as she twisted her fingers into her dress.*

*“May I present Lady Niki Nihachu, Emissary to the Order of Anthemoessa,” the woman announced, resting both her hands on the girl’s shoulders. “As according to our alliance agreement, she will be attending to both the boys, to ensure there are no attempts at manipulating the future of the relationship between Eldingvegr and Themis from Eldingvegr officials.”*

*Eret blinked, blank eyes wide with surprise. They recovered quickly though, giving the girl a gentle smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Nihachu.”*

*The girl—Niki—dipped her head in respect. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Your Majesty.” Her voice was far softer than the woman’s was, and judging by how hunched over she was, she was just as nervous as Wilbur.*

*The woman then tapped her shoulder, before nudging her forward. Niki nodded, taking a breath before she stepped right in front of the three of them.*

*“Prince Theseus,” she said stiffly, curtsying to Tommy who was falling asleep on Eret’s shoulder now. Then, she turned to Wilbur, and curtsied again. “Prince Orpheus. I look forward to working with you both,” she continued, clearly reciting some script she had been forced to memorize.*

*While he had no idea what ‘working’ with this girl implied, he had to admit, he was curious about her. Especially because he couldn’t remember the last time he’d gotten to spend time with someone the same age as him.*

*When he met her eyes through her chain veil, he gave her a small smile.*

*She smiled back.*

*Wilbur was awoken by a soft beeping next to his head.*

*Surprisingly, there was no moment of blissful, hazy ignorance. As soon as he was awake, he knew where he was. He was on Zephys IV, Tommy was sleeping right beside him, and they*

were set to enter into political negotiations with Emperor Philza to see if he could help them get their planet back.

And there was an incessant, *goddamn* beeping that wouldn't stop.

Rolling over, Wilbur blindly reached out for the nightstand. His fingers hit something smooth and cold, and he fumbled around for a few seconds before finally cracking open his eyes to try and find the source of the noise.

There was a small disc that was glowing a faint blue color. When Wilbur tapped the top of it, the beeping stopped, before a tinny voice rang out.

“Hello?”

Wilbur blinked at the voice. “Hello?” He muttered back, his voice rough.

“Am I speaking to Prince Orpheus or Prince Theseus?”

“Prince Orpheus,” Wilbur grumbled, resting his head back down on the pillow.

“Prince Orpheus, would you like to have breakfast brought to your room, or do you and Prince Theseus plan on going to the dining room to eat with the others?”

*Others?*

Frowning, Wilbur lifted his head again. “What do you mean by others?”

Did this servant mean the Emperor and the Imperator? Wilbur wouldn't have imagined they'd be allowed to eat at the same table as the two of them, but if that was the case, it could be invaluable for gaining more time to negotiate-

“The nobles and ambassadors who live in the palace tend to take their meals there. The Emperor and the Imperator have their own private dining quarters though.”

Oh. Well, that's what Wilbur expected.

While a part of him wanted to say that he'd rather take the food in their room, he also knew they couldn't just hide out there until Philza and Technoblade made time to meet with them again. Besides, if there were ambassadors from other planets living in the palace, Wilbur wanted to see who they were. Staying in the heart of the Antarctic Empire was a rare opportunity, and Wilbur wanted to use it to find out as much as he could about the Empire itself.

“We'll go down,” Wilbur said, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

“I'll send a guard up shortly to escort you to the dining room.”

With that, the disc went dark, and Wilbur collapsed back onto his pillow with a loud groan. His stomach was already grumbling, ready for more food after having been forced to ration for the past several days in the crawlspace.

Glancing to his left, he saw Tommy's face half-smashed into his pillow, a bit of drool trailing out of the corner of his mouth. Reaching over, Wilbur poked him in the cheek.

"Get up, child. We gotta go to breakfast."

Letting out an incoherent grumble, Tommy smacked Wilbur's finger away. "I know, I heard you talking," he muttered, turning his face more into the pillow. "Why didn't you let them bring the food to us?"

"Because we should take the opportunity to find out what other planets are under the Antarctic Empire's control while we can. And a great way to do that is to find out what ambassadors are here at the palace," Wilbur explained, already sitting up.

Tommy groaned. "You're so fucking strategic and shit," he mumbled. "Can't you just let a man sleep?"

"I'm gonna go use the bathroom real quick, and when I get out it's your turn, okay?" Wilbur said, his tone leaving no room for argument as he pushed the blankets off his legs. There was another unintelligible complaint from Tommy, but Wilbur ignored it as he got to his feet and walked to the bathroom.

A few minutes later, Wilbur found himself standing in front of the sink, getting a good look at his reflection for the first time in days. His face was thin, cheeks hollowed out with dark bags sitting under his eyes. His hair was a ratty, frizzy mess of curls, and he poured some water on his fingers to try and tame it at least the tiniest bit. After that, he splashed some of the water on his face, wincing at how cold it was but grateful for the way it rinsed away the last vestiges of sleep from his head.

He stared at his reflection for a moment too long. Even though nothing explicit had changed about his appearance, he felt as though he looked five years older than he had a few days ago. There was something pained behind his eyes, something that reminded him of the look Niki gave him as he and Tommy ran away from her room, leaving her behind.

Wilbur winced thinking of Niki. Was she alright? There was no way for him to know if Dream had taken out his frustration at their escape on her. The Themisians wouldn't be happy, but how much did Dream care about keeping the Themisians happy?

*"You left me,"* he could almost hear her say, her voice slithering around his mind like a coiled snake. *"You lied to me."*

*I'm sorry,* Wilbur thought.

The fake Niki in his mind didn't reply.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, Tommy was sitting up on the bed, dragging his fingers through his hair and making it stick up in every direction. He glanced up at Wilbur, and Wilbur tiredly pointed to the bathroom behind him. Getting the hint, Tommy stumbled out of bed, and Wilbur wandered over to the closet as he heard the bathroom door shut behind him.

Opening up the closet doors, Wilbur eyed the clothing he'd brushed over the night before in search of pajamas. He could see some rather plain looking pants and long-sleeved turtlenecks, along with several options for heavy coats.

Wilbur searched to find whichever set looked like it would fit him the best. He got changed while Tommy was still in the bathroom, and Tommy came back out right as Wilbur was fitting the coat over his shirt.

"What are you wearing?" Tommy asked, his hair looking much more tamed than it had been five minutes before.

"Found it in the closet," Wilbur shrugged. "Most of it looks closer to your size than mine though."

The black pants were just a tad too short on him, which wasn't surprising, but was frustrating all the same. Still, once he put a pair of heavy leather boots on, it mostly hid the length issue, so it wasn't that big of a deal overall.

The coat Wilbur had grabbed was made of a thick, velvet-like fabric that was dyed a deep shade of teal, and had a large, foldover collar. It also had a belt already attached around the waist, so he secured that as best he could, with the coat itself falling to his hips. Tommy put on a similar outfit, although the coat he grabbed was a lighter shade of blue. He also didn't have a belt on his, so he left his coat open, even though Wilbur knew he was going to complain about being cold sooner or later.

Right as they had both finished getting dressed, there was a knock on the door that made them freeze.

"That must be the guard they sent up to escort us," Wilbur whispered.

Tommy let out a small breath of relief. "Oh, right."

Walking over to the door, Wilbur did one more cursory glance around the room to make sure they weren't forgetting anything (even though it wasn't as though they had any possessions to forget), before he pressed a button on the wall to make the door slide open.

The guard on the other side was a guy who was probably around Wilbur's age, or possibly even younger. He was wearing the same uniform as the rest of the guards, and had a thin face with a shaved head.

"Oi, you the Eldingvegr princes?" The guard asked, stunningly casual compared to how Puffy had spoken to them before.

Wilbur blinked. "Um, yes."

"Cool. I'm here to take you down to the dining room. You ready to go?" They both nodded, and he gestured for them to follow him. "Alright, c'mon then."

Letting the door shut behind them, Tommy grabbed Wilbur's hand again as they made their way down the hall. The guard walked in front of them, his boots heavy against the stone, his

long coat fluttering out behind him with every step.

“So,” the guard said after they’d only been walking for a few minutes, “because I’m on ‘probation’ for ‘being a hazard’ to the other guards, I’m assigned to basically be your taxi service for however long you’re here.”

Wilbur blinked, while Tommy raised an eyebrow.

“How’d you fuck up that badly?” Tommy asked, making Wilbur sigh.

The guard whirled around to scowl at Tommy. “What, a man can’t accidentally stab himself without getting shit on for it?”

There was a beat of silence as Wilbur struggled to stifle a laugh. Tommy, meanwhile, didn’t even bother hiding it.

“Wh- How did you end up stabbing *yourself*?!” He gasped between laughs.

“It was an accident! Sometimes you have a knife and it slips-”

“So you’re more of a hazard to yourself than you are to the other guards,” Wilbur pointed out, fighting back a grin.

The guard’s scowl deepened. “I’m not a hazard at all!”

“Sounds like you are,” Tommy argued.

“Oh shut up, you’re like twelve,” the guard scoffed.

Tommy gasped. “Excuse you, asshole! I’m fifteen!”

“Same thing,” the guard said, rolling his eyes.

Looking the guard up and down, Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “How old are you then? You don’t seem like you could be that much older than either of us.”

At this, the guard faltered. His steps slowed as he hesitated, before he squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest with what seemed to Wilbur like false bravado.

“I’m eighteen, but-”

“Oh, you motherfucker!” Tommy cut him off. “You can’t say shit when you’re literally younger than Wilbur!”

The guard blinked, furrowing his brows. “Who’s Wilbur?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Wilbur let out a soft sigh. “That’s my personal name.”

“Ah, got it,” the guard nodded, before he resumed his walking. “Y’know, I never understood that whole bit with the royals having personal names and then their ‘proper’ names or

whatever you call it. Just feels a bit redundant to me, especially since the Emperor and Imperator don't have multiple names."

Wilbur shrugged. "It's a formality. Meant to differentiate the work we do as royals from our personal lives I suppose."

"I mean I get it, but it just seems stupid," the guard huffed. "I'm just Jack Manifold. No fancy names here."

"Jack Manifold? That's two names right there, dumbass," Tommy pointed out.

The guard—Jack, apparently—flashed Tommy a confused look. "Manifold is my surname. You know what that is? A surname?"

Immediately, Tommy's frown smoothed out as his cheeks flushed red. "Oh, right. We don't have surnames so I forget about them."

"The fuck do you mean you don't have surnames?" Jack asked, frowning again.

"Royals don't have a need for surnames. At least not on Eldingvegr," Wilbur explained, grabbing Tommy by the arm to pull him closer as they turned down another hall. "If we really needed them, I suppose you could use our third names as surnames, but that's not really something we've ever needed to do."

The guard processed this for a moment, deep lines forming between his brows as he mulled it over. Then, he huffed again. "Fuckin' royals. Never gonna understand you lot."

"I don't think you're supposed to be this rude to two princes," Wilbur pointed out, although he wasn't actually annoyed with Jack's behavior. If anything, it reminded Wilbur of Tubbo and how little he cared for royal etiquette, but that reminder just made his chest ache. He was sure it was even worse for Tommy.

At this, Jack let out a harsh laugh. "You think I'm pissing myself afraid that you two are gonna tell Puffy I was rude or something? Nah. There's not gonna be any ass kissing here, gentlemen."

Folding his arms over his chest, Tommy snorted. "Wow. You really are a prick, Manifold."

Over his shoulder, Jack flashed them a sharp smile. "Right back at you..." he trailed off, squinting at Tommy. "Shit, which one are you? Puffy told me your names are Theseus and Orpheus but she didn't specify which one was which."

Before Tommy could yell another insult at Jack, Wilbur slammed a hand over his mouth as he answered instead. "I'm Prince Orpheus, and he's Theseus, the Crown Prince."

Jack nodded and turned away from them to keep walking. "Oh yeah, the kid is the one inheriting the throne 'cause you're the bastard. I remember now."

And just like that, all of Wilbur's appreciation for Jack's frankness vanished. He stiffened, while Tommy shot him a confused look.

He shouldn't be surprised. Of course Philza would explain to his guards what he had learned about the two of them during their conversation. Still, it stung to hear even a guard casually refer to him as a bastard child, when it had been more of an open secret back on Eldingvegr. One that everyone knew about, but no one brought up.

Thankfully, they didn't have to stay with Jack for much longer, because it was only one more turn before they were entering the dining room.

Dark stone archways lifted up a vaulted ceiling, with smooth, untouched pillars descending down to the floor. The room itself was very large and not too dissimilar to the dining hall back on Eldingvegr—save for the vast differences in color scheme and architecture.

One long dining table made of some marble-like black stone stretched across most of the room. Plates of food were piled high in the center, with various people dressed in similar finery to what Wilbur and Tommy were wearing sat at the table and ate their meals.

“Well go on,” Jack said after a moment had passed. “Hurry up and eat. I gotta wait here till you're done.”

Scowling at Jack, Wilbur tugged on Tommy's arm to lead him towards the table. They left Jack behind, fully making their way into the dining room as Wilbur tried to figure out where they should sit.

Should they try to sit next to some important-looking person and see if they could strike up a conversation? Or should they keep to themselves and hope someone approached them? What was considered proper noble etiquette when you were a refugee-

“TOMMY!”

Wilbur and Tommy both whirled around hearing Tommy's name shouted across the dining room. Before Wilbur could even try to process the fact that someone here was calling Tommy not just by his personal name, but by his *nickname*, there was a figure running towards them, and both he and Tommy recognized them at the same time.

“Aimsey?!” Tommy exclaimed.

As soon as he said their name, they were throwing their arms around him, and he was hunching over to hug them back. Wilbur could only stare in shock at the two of them, because one, neither of them had seen Aimsey in years and two, he didn't have the slightest clue why they'd be on Zephyr IV of all places.

Aimsey didn't look all that different from the last time Wilbur had seen them. They had a white knit cap shoved on top of their head, and the small, red and white flowers blooming from their cheeks and hair seemed just as healthy as ever. Surprisingly, they were dressed in similar Antarctic Empire fashion to Wilbur and Tommy, with a white button-up shirt tucked into high-waisted trousers, and a heavy teal coat resting on their shoulders.

After a few seconds of hugging, Aimsey pulled back, and their dark eyes fell on Wilbur. “Holy shit, Wil's here too?”



Tommy blinked. “Uh, yeah, we’re both- well, it’s kinda fuckin’ complicated.”

“What? What’s going on?” Aimsey asked, furrowing their brows in concern.

Shit. This was going to be awkward to explain.

After a second of hesitation, Tommy shot a pleading look at Wilbur. “Wil, do you wanna explain?”

“Fuck, yeah, okay.” Taking a breath, he dragged a hand down his face as he tried to gather his thoughts. “The gist of it is that, uh, remember Eret? The King Regent who was ruling until Tommy turned eighteen?”

Aimsey nodded. “Yeah, the one who wore all the fancy dresses and had the white eyes, right?”

“Yup, that’s them. They basically, uh, betrayed us,” Wilbur explained, wringing his hands in front of him. “They made a deal with Emperor Dream of Essempi to let him take over Eldingvegr.”

“Oh my god,” Aimsey muttered, their eyes blown wide.

“Dream tried to kill us,” Tommy continued, wincing at the words. “We managed to steal a shuttle to get off planet, and Wil took us here so we could get asylum.”

Horror washed over Aimsey’s face as their eyes flickered between Wilbur and Tommy. “I- I’m so- Holy shit, that’s so much. Are you guys okay? How long have you been here?”

“We literally just got here yesterday,” Tommy told them.

“God that sounds horrible,” Aimsey said, folding their arms over their chest. “How about Tubbo? And Niki? Did either of them come with you or are they still on Eldingvegr?”

At the mention of Tubbo, Tommy flinched, while Wilbur sucked in a sharp breath.

“We had to leave Niki behind while we were escaping,” Wilbur admitted first, dropping his eyes to the ground. “Apparently Dream already worked out some agreement with Themis before they invaded, so I don’t think he’s going to hurt her but, uh, obviously we don’t know that for sure.”

“I’m so sorry,” Aimsey murmured. “What about Tubbo then?”

There was a moment of silence as Tommy clenched his jaw, refusing to meet Aimsey’s eyes. Aimsey didn’t push, simply waited as they picked absently at the flowers growing on their hands.

After a few beats, Tommy took a shuddering breath and straightened back up.

“Tubbo... betrayed us,” he said quietly.

Aimsey gasped. “What?!”

“The night the invasion happened he came into my room trying to get me and Wil to take sleeping pills and was weirdly pushy about it. Later on after the invasion had started, Wil and I were hiding and overheard Tubbo talking to Eret. He knew what was going to happen ahead of time, but...” he paused, curling his hand into a fist. “He didn’t try to warn us. He knew, and he didn’t try to help us at all.”

“That can’t be right,” Aimsey said, shaking their head. “Tubbo wouldn’t do that. He’s your best friend!”

“Yeah,” Tommy huffed, swallowing down a lump in his throat, “I thought so too.”

Aimsey frowned, reaching out a hand to rest on Tommy’s arm. He gave them a grateful smile, although it was obviously lined with pain.

“I’m really glad you’re safe now at least,” Aimsey told them after a moment, giving them a small smile. “There’s no way Dream will be able to get you here. He wouldn’t mess with the Antarctic Empire like that.”

“That’s the hope,” Wilbur huffed, leaning against Tommy’s back.

“Wait, speaking of the Antarctic Empire,” Tommy then cut in again, “why are you here?”

Immediately, Aimsey’s smile faded again. “Oh, yeah, I guess the news didn’t really get around. About two years ago, Floslium got taken over by the Antarctic Empire,” they explained, wringing their hands together. “Well, I guess saying taken over is a bit harsh. We agreed to join the Antarctic Empire, but it wasn’t like we had much of a choice.”

“Because the Antarctic Empire would just invade you if you refused?” Wilbur asked, narrowing his eyes.

Aimsey snorted. “Kind of, but it was more because Essempi was already looking at taking over Floslium, and everyone knows that Essempi isn’t exactly kind to the planets it rules. The Antarctic Empire at least allows us to continue governing ourselves with only minor oversight. The only real restriction we have is that the Emperor is the one with the final say on most of our imports and exports, so he pretty much controls our economy.”

Oh. The Antarctic Empire ruled by letting planets mostly continue to govern themselves. Economic control versus full control. Compared to Essempi which was known for establishing puppet government officials on all of its territories that were only there to serve Dream’s interests, Wilbur could understand why the Antarctic Empire would be more appealing.

“So then are you here on a diplomatic mission?” Tommy then asked.

Aimsey nodded. “Pretty much! I’m an attaché for Floslium now, and I stay here with the other diplomats where we can go over any policy decisions the Emperor wants to make regarding Floslium.”

“That’s cool at least. Finally getting an official diplomat role instead of just being an assistant,” Tommy said, offering them a weak smile.

“It’s been pretty interesting,” Aimsey said, laughing softly. Suddenly, they blinked as if realizing something, and straightened up. “Oh yeah, you guys must be starving. C’mon, let’s sit so you can eat.”

Now that wasn’t something either of them was going to deny, so the brothers followed Aimsey to the long table. They quickly picked out three seats for them, and settled with Tommy sitting in between Wilbur and Aimsey.

The plates were loaded with more of that unfamiliar roasted meat from the night before, along with a few vegetables Wilbur recognized, and some he didn’t. There were almost no fruits, save for one that reminded Wilbur of an epli, but it was purple instead of red.

Tommy piled his plate high with food, struggling to balance it as he set it down in front of himself. Wilbur restrained himself despite his rumbling stomach, getting a more normal-sized portion. Meanwhile, Aimsey didn’t grab a plate, instead taking out a small, handheld lamp from their pocket and tapping a switch to turn it on. Their face was cast in purple, and the flowers on their cheeks and in their hair immediately tilted towards the light source.

Noticing Wilbur watching, Aimsey then flashed Wilbur a small smile. “Not much sunlight gets through the ice here, so I use this to eat instead.”

Right. Flora like Aimsey didn’t need to eat normal food, instead getting energy directly from sunlight. Back on Eldingvegr, he remembered them complaining about how because of the permanent twilight sky, they had to sit outside for way longer than they were used to to feel full.

Suddenly, there was a new voice behind the three of them.

“Aimsey?”

Aimsey jumped, face breaking out into a wide grin. “Ranboo! C’mere, sit down. I wanna introduce you to some old friends of mine!”

Looking over his shoulder, Wilbur saw an enderian glancing nervously between Aimsey, Tommy, and Wilbur. Like most enderian, he was ridiculously tall, but unlike most enderian his skin wasn’t completely black. Instead, it was spotted with splotches of white, his face a near perfect split right down the center. His hair was similar—mostly black and falling to his shoulders, with bits of white streaked throughout.

The unusual enderian—Ranboo—was dressed in a very expensive-looking white blouse embroidered with purple and blue stitching of what Wilbur was pretty sure was supposed to be stars. He was also wearing lots of silver and gold jewelry, from necklaces to rings to earrings. This guy was most likely very wealthy, and probably had some role of importance in the palace.

Someone to know. He’d keep that in mind.

Ranboo sat down next to Aimsey, hunching over to rest his elbows on the table. His eyes—one green and one red—darted around, never settling on one single thing. His fingers tapped on the table, and it was obvious he was nervous.

“Tommy, Wilbur, this is my friend, Ranboo,” Aimsey introduced. “Ranboo, this is Prince Theseus and his older brother Prince Orpheus of Eldingvegr.”

Up until this point, Ranboo had been avoiding looking at either one of them. But at Aimsey’s introduction, his eyes snapped to the two of them, and he jumped in his seat as if he’d been shocked.

“Oh! It’s- You’re the princes! Techno told me about you guys but-“

“Wait, you call the Emperor by his name?” Wilbur cut in, eyes narrowing as he wondered who exactly this enderian was.

Ranboo blinked, shrinking back like he was trying to curl in on himself. “Uh, yeah. He’s kind of my mentor.”

Now *that* was very interesting.

“What, are you like the Emperor’s intern or something?” Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, um, kind of? He’s training me to be a military strategist.”

If Wilbur had to take a guess what Ranboo was studying, military strategy was certainly not what he would’ve picked. Not with the way anxiety was practically rolling off of him in waves, and how it seemed like one strong breeze would be enough to knock him over.

“Wait, can someone explain to me how you all know each other?” Ranboo then asked, furrowing his brows.

Aimsey perked up. “Oh! Right! You know how I was part of the junior diplomats when I was a kid?” Ranboo nodded. “About four years ago now, there was a whole diplomatic summit being held on Eldingvegr with a lot of different planets attending. Floslium was one of them, and so I was there for three months. All the diplomats stayed in the palace, and I became friends with Tommy and Wilbur while I was there.”

For the most part, Aimsey spent time with Tommy and Tubbo while they had been staying at the palace. The three of them became somewhat of a trio, and almost always could be found together unless Aimsey was off doing diplomat training.

At the very least, it was somewhat reassuring to have Aimsey here. From what Wilbur could remember, they were one of the idealist types—someone who got into government because they genuinely wanted to improve things, which was a rare find in the field of politics these days.

“Oh, that’s cool,” Ranboo muttered, seemingly unsure what else to say. “You guys are here because, um, there are problems on Eldingvegr, right?”

Tommy huffed. "Our planet got invaded. You can just say it."

Ranboo winced. "Seems like it'd be a bit of a sensitive topic for you."

"It is, but I'm not gonna pretend it's not happening," Tommy grumbled, leaning back in his seat.

"Still, I'm sorry this happened, Tommy."

Immediately, Tommy and Wilbur both stiffened.

"Theseus," Wilbur corrected, narrowing his eyes. "You call him Theseus, and me Orpheus."

"But Aimsey called you--"

"Ran, you have to be granted permission to call them by their personal names," Aimsey said quietly, resting a hand on his arm.

"It'd be like if I were to just start callin' the Emperor and the Imperator by their first names," Tommy cut in, frowning at Ranboo. "That wouldn't be appropriate, right?"

Ranboo shook his head. "Well no, not really."

"Then don't call me Tommy."

Clenching his jaw, Ranboo gave one sharp, small nod, before leaning back stiffly against his seat.

A moment of awkward silence fell over the group. Wilbur and Tommy both went back to eating, while Aimsey continued soaking in the light of their lamp. Ranboo didn't say anything else, instead fiddling with his hands in his lap and keeping his head down.

Once Tommy and Wilbur had both nearly finished their food, there was another set of footsteps behind them.

"You guys done eating yet?"

It was Jack.

"Just about," Wilbur said, glancing over his shoulder to raise an eyebrow at him. "Are you really getting that impatient?"

Jack scowled. "Actually, I just got word that the Emperor and the Imperator want to see you, prick."

Oh.

Wilbur was glad he'd already eaten most of his food, because his appetite disappeared in an instant. He looked over to Tommy, who had paused mid-chew to blink owlishly at Wilbur. Then, he swallowed down the rest, and fully turned around to face Jack.

“Do you know why he’s summoning us?”

“You think I get paid enough to be told that?” Jack deadpanned.

Wilbur snorted. “Fair point.” He stood up from his chair, while Tommy hurriedly ate the last few scraps off his plate. Then, he pushed to his feet, and Wilbur noticed he’d gone pale.

“What’s going on?” Aimsey asked, giving them both a worried look.

“We’re, uh, having some negotiations with the Emperor,” Tommy told them, and judging by the way he was shifting from foot to foot, he was unsure of whether or not to say more.

Reaching out, Wilbur gently grabbed Tommy’s arm and began to tug him away from the table. “Yeah, we should really get going. We wouldn’t want to keep the Emperor waiting.”

Aimsey nodded and waved them goodbye. Beside them, Ranboo also gave them a hesitant wave, which he just nodded at before turning around to follow Jack out of the dining room. Tommy, sticking close to his side, did the same.

They followed Jack down the hallways once again, and unlike before, this time Jack didn’t bother to make small talk with them. He was holding his shoulders straighter now, his head held high as he led them somewhere only he knew. The longer they walked for, the more nervous Wilbur got as he realized he had no idea what to expect.

If this was the start of their negotiations, what were Philza and Technoblade going to request? If it was something ludicrous, how could they rebuttal it? Usually, there was a whole team of advisors available for a king during negotiations like these, but right now the closest thing Tommy had to an advisor was Wilbur.

Wilbur had no idea how he was going to advise Tommy for this. In the past, he’d always been told he’d have time to prepare and study the planet they were negotiating with before advising on decisions. But this wasn’t a normal situation. Wilbur barely knew anything about Zephyr IV or the Antarctic Empire as a whole, and he was sure that Philza and Technoblade were going to use that to their advantage.

The three sets of footsteps echoing off the walls reflected the thundering in Wilbur’s ribcage. There was always the chance that Philza and Technoblade could choose to take back their mercy and risk an Eldingvegr takeover without the Crown on their side. Outside of inconvenience, realistically speaking, there was nothing preventing the Emperor from executing both of them.

By bringing them here, all Wilbur had done was bought them time. Just because Tommy’s neck wasn’t on the guillotine didn’t mean the blade wasn’t still waiting above his head.

This time, Jack didn’t bring them to the throne room like Puffy had the day before. Instead, they were led past the imposing throne room doors, down the hall and to another set of smaller doors. Jack nodded at the two guards, before turning back to Tommy and Wilbur.

“I’ll be waiting out here till you’re done.”

And with that, the guards opened the dark doors. Tommy took a shaky breath before he grabbed Wilbur's hand again, and both boys pulled back their shoulders before making their way inside.

Like all the rooms in the palace, the negotiations room was all dark stone and metal. One large window looked out over the city, while the space itself was dominated by a large, circular table made of similar dark stone to the table in the dining hall. On one side of the table, Philza and Technoblade both sat. A few guards waited by the walls, but besides that, it was only those two waiting for Tommy and Wilbur.

As the soft hiss of the doors closing echoed through the room, Wilbur kept his hand in Tommy's as he bowed, with Tommy quickly mirroring him. Once they had straightened up, Philza hummed.

"Please, take a seat," he said, gesturing to the chairs on the other side of the table from him and Technoblade.

They both sat down, and Tommy scooted his chair ever so slightly closer to Wilbur's so that their shoulders were brushing.

A moment of silence was held taut between them like a string. Wilbur waited, scanning Philza and Technoblade's faces to try and see if he could figure out what either one was thinking.

Unfortunately, reading expressions had never been Wilbur's strong suit, and the two were masters at keeping poker faces.

"You both look better than you did yesterday," Philza commented after nearly a minute, shattering the silence.

"We're grateful for the accommodations His Majesty has provided us with," Wilbur said, dipping his head in thanks.

Philza raised an eyebrow at this. "Damn, they really trained you well, didn't they?"

Wilbur blinked. "I'm, uh, not sure how to respond to that."

"What, that wasn't part of the polite phrases they made you memorize?" Technoblade taunted.

Beside him, Tommy bristled. "Are you gonna tell us why the fuck we're here or what?"

Wincing at Tommy's crassness, Wilbur elbowed him in the side and gave him a sharp look. Tommy hissed in pain, but shut his mouth and slumped back against his chair.

Meanwhile, Philza was smirking at the two of them again. "I suppose we can just get on with it instead of all the bullshit pleasantries." Shifting in his seat, his feathers ruffled as he folded his hands in front of him. "I thought you both might want to know that the rest of the galaxy has finally heard about Dream's invasion of Eldingvegr."

Wilbur's heart leapt into his throat. "What?"

"A message was broadcasted to what seems like every planet that's ever had dealings for blaziphane, which basically means every planet in the galaxy," Technoblade explained, resting his elbows on the table. "It was Dream declaring that Eldingvegr is now part of the Essempi Empire, and that in the coming months, blaziphane trades may be delayed as new policies are put into place."

"Has anyone responded?" Wilbur asked, leaning forward in his seat. "Have any statements been made? Is anyone protesting this?"

"Kid, we received the message like, less than an hour ago. I'm sure we'll see how the other planets respond in the next few days."

"We'll keep you updated as things progress, but I'm sure the rest of the interplanetary community isn't going to be thrilled about this," Philza picked up after Technoblade stopped talking.

A part of Wilbur wanted to ask about if Themis had made any official commentary on the situation, but he held his tongue. Very few people knew about Eldingvegr and Themis' involvement with one another, considering Themis was already closed off to nearly every planet in the galaxy and preferred to keep its political moves—like the marriage between their mother and Tommy's father—as quiet as could be. Because of that, Wilbur knew it would make no sense for him to ask about Themis, so he would just have to wait and see if Philza brought the planet up on his own.

It wasn't likely though. Considering Themis had apparently been aware of Dream's plan all along, he doubted they would make any kind of statement on the takeover and instead adopt the same policy of silence they'd taken on most major events that happened in the galaxy.

"Speaking of interplanetary relations," Technoblade cut in again, "how are you feeling about those negotiations we mentioned yesterday?"

For this, Wilbur had to defer to Tommy, and Tommy hesitated for a moment as he tried to think of how to respond.

"Well, I need to know what you're asking for first," Tommy finally said after a few beats.

Philza nodded. "Yes, of course. I mean, it's a simple thing really. If we are to take Eldingvegr back from Dream, I'm sure you can guess what I'm going to ask for in return."

Tommy paused, curling his fingers into a fist as he shot Wilbur a pleading look. Getting the hint, Wilbur leaned closer, and Tommy turned to whisper in his ear, "Is he talking about controlling blaziphane?"

Pride swelled in Wilbur's chest at Tommy's observation. "Yes, I'd imagine that's exactly what he wants."

Nodding, Tommy shifted to face the Emperor and Imperator once again.



“You want to control the blaziphane trade.”

Philza’s smirk sharpened. “What else would I ask for? For hundreds of years, Eldingvegr has been the sole controller of blaziphane, which is how you’ve managed to retain your independence and wealth for so long. But if an empire were to get ahold of blaziphane, it would be a monumental source of income and could literally change an empire’s entire prospects.”

Tommy narrowed his eyes. “That’s what Dream wants to do.”

Making a tsking sound, Philza shook his head. “I’m not like Dream. Yes, I want control of the blaziphane trade, but I’m not the type of Emperor to rule my subjects with an iron fist. For the most part, business would continue as it always has on Eldingvegr. Practically half the economy relies on blaziphane, and I wouldn’t want to disrupt that. But I would have final say on who you sell to, how much you sell it for, how many shipments are sent out and how frequently, and of course I would receive a percentage of the profit.”

Grabbing Tommy’s shoulder, Wilbur pulled him closer to whisper in his ear. “No fucking way. We could never agree to restrictions like that.”

“But he’s not exactly saying he’d restrict us,” Tommy pointed out. “He’s just saying he’d be the one in charge of approving shit.”

“That’s what he’s saying now, but if he has the right to restrict us, then I guarantee you he’s going to use it,” Wilbur hissed, squeezing Tommy’s shoulder. “We can’t give him that. *Maybe* we can discuss a percentage, but we can’t let the Empire take control.”

Nodding, Tommy turned back to the two men. “Can’t do that, gentlemen. We could consider a percentage of the profit, but we’re not giving up our control.”

“Is that what Prince Orpheus just told you to say?” Technoblade asked, condescension dripping from his words.

“I’m his advisor,” Wilbur snapped without thinking. “I’ve been training for this role my entire life, and any monarch is entitled to have an advisor with them during negotiations.”

Technoblade huffed. “Wasn’t sayin’ he didn’t have the right. I was just curious if that was your decision or his.”

“He doesn’t make decisions for me,” Tommy said, frowning at Technoblade. “My brother advises me on what he believes is the best course of action, and then I can choose what to do with that information.”

“While that is true, you are also a child being advised by another child,” Philza then pointed out.

“Eighteen is the age of majority on Eldingvegr, and on most planets with human residents,” Wilbur shot back, bristling at the implication that he wasn’t fit for his role. “I’m nineteen,

therefore I'm not a child. And I'm perfectly capable of advising my brother on these negotiations."

"You might legally be an adult, Prince Orpheus, but you are still very much a child." The words were eerily reminiscent to what Eret had told him the day before the invasion, and the memory sent a chill down Wilbur's spine. "I'm sure you're both aware that I'm an elytrian, but do either of you know how long an elytrian can live for?"

Both Tommy and Wilbur went silent at this, sharing uncertain glances as Wilbur wracked his mind to try and think of all he'd learned about elytrians. There wasn't much he had been taught about the race considering they were almost entirely extinct—at least pure elytrians were. Avians were the result of the surviving elytrian population intermixing with other species, but according to most literature, the only similarity avians really carried from their elytrian parents were the wings, which they couldn't even fly with.

"No, I don't believe either of us know what the average elytrian lifespan is," Wilbur answered after a few moments.

Philza folded his hands in front of him, his talons clicking against the stone table. "The average elytrian can live for up to two hundred years, and often can live even longer than that. Humans like you are lucky if you make it to one hundred, correct?"

*Humans like you.* So Philza hadn't noticed any of their subtle siren traits it seemed. That was good. It would be better to keep their connection to Themis a secret, just in case they ever needed a card up their sleeves.

Though in the context of the question it didn't matter much. Sirens and humans had nearly the same lifespan anyway.

"Yes, disregarding blaziphane use, the average human usually lives to be somewhere around ninety to one hundred," Wilbur told him.

"Do you want to take a guess as to how old I am, Prince Orpheus?" Philza asked, something dangerous glinting in his eyes.

Taking a sharp breath, Wilbur's eyes skimmed over Philza's features. By human standards, he only seemed to be somewhere in his early forties, if not younger. There were few wrinkles on his face, and there were no grey strands in his pale blonde hair. At most Wilbur would say he was forty-two, but he reasonably could've been thirty-five and Wilbur wouldn't have been surprised.

But by elytrian standards? Wilbur had no clue how to guess his age.

"I'm not familiar with how elytrians tend to age, so any guess I take would likely be incorrect."

Philza laughed, tilting his head back as the harsh sound echoed through the room. "You're so careful with your words, Prince Orpheus. I won't be fucking offended or anything, but I suppose if you don't want to try, I can just tell you." Reaching up, Philza brushed some of the

hair out of his face as his wings stretched out behind him. “I’m going to be eighty-one this year, which is barely middle-aged by elytrian standards. But if I was a human, I would be nearing the end of my lifespan, correct?”

Stiffly, Wilbur nodded.

“Trust me when I tell you that you are a *child*, Prince Orpheus. You might think of yourself as more mature than Prince Theseus, but in a decade’s time you’ll understand that there is very little difference between the two of you right now.”

“Well, what do you want us to do about it? It’s not as though we can get other advisors from Eldingvegr to assist us with the negotiations,” Wilbur pointed out, still bristling even with Tommy squeezing his hand under the table.

“You’re right. We can’t do that, and I wouldn’t expect you to trust advisors from anyone in my Empire, so you are the only advisor Prince Theseus will have,” Philza explained. “I just hope you’re both aware of the disadvantage you’re working with here. You can try to make demands, but the truth is, neither of you has the slightest damn clue what you’re doing.”

While Wilbur could feel the frustration building inside of him, he could also recognize bait when it was laid out so plainly in front of him.

“Which is a disadvantage you’re going to exploit,” Wilbur said coolly, ignoring the way Tommy was fuming beside him.

“I’d be a fool not to,” Philza replied, his sharp smile pinning Wilbur down and making him feel like everything inside of him was being pulled out and put on display.

Still, Wilbur did his best to hold onto his head. “But you’re also telling us upfront about the weakness we have, which presumably is our lack of personal experience in these matters. So why tell us that? Why not let the Emperor continue to goad my brother with taunts, trying to make him frustrated enough that he refuses to listen to my advice?”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Tommy cut in, frowning at Wilbur.

Sighing, Wilbur gave Tommy a look that read *don’t cut into this*. Thankfully, Tommy got the hint, and slumped back in his seat with a pout on his face.

Meanwhile, Philza had started laughing again. “You might know how to dress up your words better, but I can see where Prince Theseus gets his mouth from.”

“I’m unsure if you mean that as a compliment or an insult.”

“That’s for you to decide,” Philza said, staring down Wilbur with eyes so cold, they sent shivers down his spine.

There was something about Philza that Wilbur was beginning to notice, and it was that he always seemed to watch Wilbur more than Tommy when they were having discussions.

Wilbur supposed it made sense since he tended to do more of the talking, but it also felt like Philza was trying to look *through* him. Like there was something searching in his eyes—as if he wanted to pick apart Wilbur’s brain with a pair of tweezers just to see how it worked.

Or maybe Wilbur was just unsettled by the Emperor staring him down. That could be it too.

“Phil, can you try not being ominous for, like, two seconds?” Technoblade suddenly cut in, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts. “You still haven’t even told them the actual thing you called them in here for.”

Philza’s smile was replaced with brief confusion, before his eyes widened in understanding. “Oh shit, right. I wanted to mention to you both that we’re not going to meet for several days. With this recent news about Eldingvegr getting out, there’s a lot of discussions I’m going to need to have with the other planets in the Antarctic Empire.”

“How many days?” Tommy asked, furrowing his brows.

“I don’t fucking know, mate. Four, maybe five days? Believe it or not, you two aren’t exactly my top priority considering I still have a whole empire to run over here,” Philza huffed, his feathers ruffling again. “Besides, it’s not like either of you have anywhere else to be.”

While it was true, it still was frustrating to have pointed out. Philza was right. The two of them were completely at the mercy of the man’s schedule. Whenever he decided it was time for them to meet again, that’s the only time they would. Wilbur and Tommy quite literally had nowhere else in the galaxy to go, so there was no schedule demanding their attention besides Philza’s.

It was another show of control. Another dig to remind them that despite their rankings and titles, in the Antarctic Empire, they wielded no power.

“Are we done here for today, then?” Wilbur asked tightly, glaring at Philza.

“We’re done. Techno and I will be seeing you both soon,” Philza said, leaning back in his seat as he waved them off.

Biting back a sharp retort, Wilbur tugged Tommy out of the chair, making sure he wasn’t going to try and say anything stupid as they headed back towards the doors. Wilbur could feel eyes boring into the back of his head with every step, but he did his best to ignore them, and left the room with his shoulders pushed back and chin held high.

Fine. If this was a game Philza wanted to play, Wilbur could play too. If he wanted to point out how neither of them was experienced enough for this sort of thing, Wilbur would just have to prove him wrong.

Tommy would handle the negotiations. Wilbur would be a good advisor. They would because they had to. Neither one of them had a choice at this point. Either find a solution, or die. Those were their only two options, and Wilbur had already had a close enough call with death for his taste.

They *would* do it. Wilbur was determined.

Maybe Wilbur couldn't fight it out on a battlefield, but in a war of words he could stand with the best of them. And he was going to make sure Philza knew that.

## Chapter End Notes

man phil and wilbur's dynamic for this is so fun to write

also! aimsey ranboo AND jack manifold! we got a lot of new characters! this is my first time ever writing c!aimsey and I'm very excited to finally be able to include them in stuff. I know aimsey uses all pronouns, but just for the sake of consistency this fic is just going use they/them

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

there's a playlist for this fic :) check it out [here](#)

anyway, I really hope you guys enjoyed that chapter! I need to hurry up and get ready to go buy my friend a bday gift bc her party is later today lol so these are gonna be rushed but please leave a comment if you enjoyed! I don't reply to most but they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# a guillotine waiting to be dropped

## Chapter Summary

Days pass by.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone i am here with more!!

sorry for the delay in updates and stuff, I had finals this past week and tomorrow i'm going to have my graduation ceremony for uni so!!! lots of busy times! your local fanfic author is about to have a bachelors degree woohoo

anyway, very glad I was able to get this done. I have no idea when the next update will be, hopefully it shouldn't be too long but I always promise that and then something comes up that makes me super busy so who knows lmao

also for those who came to the twitter space I did like half an hour ago, thank you for showing up! for those who don't know, I just did a space on twitter where I read the first chapter of this fic (if you don't follow me on twitter you really should i'm kind of cool sometimes)

ok that's all for now! no warnings for this chapter afaik!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*As Niki straightened up from her curtsy, Eret glanced between her and Wilbur, pursing their lips.*

*“I believe we should allow the children to get to know one another while we begin our meeting. Would it be alright if Prince Orpheus were to take Lady Nihachu on a tour of the palace?” Eret asked, raising an eyebrow at the woman.*

*The woman’s eyebrows twitched, but after a beat, she nodded. “I suppose so.”*

*Eret then turned to Wilbur, crouching down to hand Tommy over. “Here, take your brother and Lady Nihachu on a tour. I’ll have the servants find you when I need you again.”*

*Wilbur nodded, taking Tommy into his arms who grumbled in tired protest at being moved, before he settled himself into Wilbur’s hold. His soft baby hairs tickled Wilbur’s chin, and made sure Tommy was secure before he gestured for Niki to follow him.*

*She followed without a word. On their way out, Wilbur shot Eret a grateful look, and they gave him a small smile before turning back to the Ambassadors.*

*Once they were outside the hangar, Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief. The women from Themis scared him, and he was glad to be out from under that one woman's sharp eyes.*

*Now though he was with the Emissary. A girl who couldn't be any older than he was. And he had to take her on a tour. Great. What was he even supposed to show her?*

*"Um... Lady Nihachu, is there anywhere you wanna see first?" Wilbur asked once they were far away from the hangar; both their shoes clicking against the smooth stone floors.*

*Niki flinched, as if she hadn't been expecting to be addressed. "I'm not sure what there is to see, Prince Orpheus," she said quietly, keeping her eyes down.*

*Oh yeah. He probably should've figured that.*

*He adjusted Tommy in his arms again as he tried to think of where he could take her. The residential wing? He could, but that was boring and she'd surely see it later anyway. The playroom? She'd see all of Tommy's toys there and might think he played with them too, and he didn't want her to think he was a baby.*

*Well... the observatory was always cool.*

*"Follow me," Wilbur told her, flashing a small smile as he picked up the pace of his walking.*

*Niki began to walk faster as well. She kept close to him as he led her down the twisting hallways, and Wilbur noticed that her eyes were wide, something like curiosity flickering in the silver. But she didn't say anything, so Wilbur didn't either.*

*Miraculously, Tommy stayed asleep through the entire walk to the observatory. As they stepped through the arched doorways, Niki let out a gasp, and Wilbur couldn't help but smile.*

*In the center of the room, the orrery glittered in gold and silver, the colorful planets rotating in their lazy circles as they always did. Outside the large windows, the rose sky was decorated with flickering stars, and Niki immediately gravitated to the glass.*

*"This is the observatory," Wilbur told her. "Do you have one of these on Themis?"*

*Niki's fingers tapped on the glass, her silver eyes fixing on the rustling of the sylfirwood trees outside. "I think there's one in the palace. I haven't seen it though," she said, not looking at him.*

*Wilbur frowned. "Why not?"*

*"I've only been in a few meeting rooms inside the palace. I don't live there," Niki told him, turning away from the window to walk towards the orrery. "People say it's really pretty though."*

*"You don't live in the palace?"*

*Niki shook her head. "Only the royal family can live in the palace."*

*Oh. For some reason, Wilbur had assumed she was part of the royal family in some way or another.*

*"How old are you?" Wilbur then asked.*

*"Eight."*

*Wilbur grinned. "Me too. I'm glad you're my age. I thought the Emissary was gonna be some boring adult." He readjusted Tommy again, wincing at how his arms were already aching from holding him. "Tommy's only three, so he's just a baby. He's kind of cool, but he can be really loud sometimes."*

*Niki giggled, turning away from the orrery to look at Tommy. "He seems pretty quiet."*

*"He's quiet right now because he's tired. But he's not. Trust me."*

*As if he could tell they were talking about him, Tommy lifted his head from Wilbur's shoulder, eyelids drooping as he sleepily blinked at him. Then, he leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Wilbur's cheek and reaching a hand up to pat his nose.*

*"Wilbyyyy," he whined, his words slurred from sleep. "I'm tired."*

*"I know, Tommy. Just go back to sleep."*

*Tommy's small face scrunched up, as if he was considering Wilbur's offer. But then he glanced behind, noticing Niki for the first time.*

*"Who's that?" He asked, pointing a pudgy finger at her.*

*"That's Lady Niki Nihachu," Wilbur told him. "She's gonna be hanging out with us a lot."*

*Tommy's frown deepened, which was pretty funny to see on a toddler. "Neimki," he said after a moment.*

*Niki giggled, while Wilbur sighed. "Niki Nihachu."*

*"Neimki!" Tommy repeated.*

*"He can call me Neimki," Niki said, smiling now. "I don't mind it."*

*Seemingly pleased at this, Tommy nodded once before pressing his forehead against Wilbur's cheek again. He babbled something that Wilbur couldn't understand, but he was pretty sure it was another complaint.*

*"Just go back to sleep, Tommy," Wilbur whispered, bouncing him up and down a bit in his arms.*

*Huffing loudly, Tommy bumped his forehead into his cheek again. "Kiss."*



*Wilbur snorted and turned his head to press a kiss to Tommy's forehead. Finally satisfied, Tommy then laid his head back down against Wilbur's shoulder, and Wilbur gave Niki an exasperated look. "He'll figure out how to say your name eventually, Lady Nihachu. He can say Wilbur perfectly fine, but he insists on saying Wilby."*

*"Sounds like he's stubborn," Niki commented, although her words were fond instead of scolding. "I've been told I'm not stubborn enough, sometimes."*

*"I can help with that! I'm also really stubborn," Wilbur said proudly. "Tommy gets it from me."*

*Niki was smiling widely now. "Teach me how to be stubborn then."*

*"Oh, I will, Lady Nihachu," Wilbur shot back.*

*So far, he liked Niki. She seemed nice and laughed at his jokes, and she was the same age as him. Wilbur couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten to hang out with someone his age. Even though he loved Tommy, he was also still a baby, and kind of sucked to hang out with.*

*"By the way, you can just call me Niki, Prince Orpheus," Niki then said.*

*"Oh thank god," Wilbur breathed. "The formal names are so weird. If someone's close to me they only call me Wilbur, and him Tommy. Since you're gonna probably be my new best friend, you can call us both those names."*

*Niki raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I'm your new best friend?"*

*"You're gonna be with me all the time, right? Since you're the emissary and all?" Niki nodded, and Wilbur smiled. "Then that means you're my best friend! Aren't best friends supposed to hang out all the time?"*

*"I suppose so," Niki giggled. "Although I've never had a best friend before."*

*"Neither have I. We can be each other's first best friends."*

The next few days were... odd.

Not necessarily in a bad way. Nothing unpleasant happened to Wilbur and Tommy as they got used to Zephys IV and explored what the palace had to offer. If anything, it was almost a relief. A chance to take a much needed reprieve from the stress of the past week.

No, what was odd was exactly that. It was a reprieve where nothing happened. *Nothing*. Of course, Wilbur shouldn't have been surprised by this. Philza told them that he was going to be too busy to see them, but it felt wrong to be hanging around the capital of the Antarctic Empire with no clue how they were going to proceed with their negotiations from there.

It was a bit like hanging in purgatory. Waiting at the steps to the guillotine, wondering if they were going to be ordered to place their heads under the blades, or if they would be allowed to walk away.

Tommy didn't seem to mind this purgatory as much as Wilbur—or maybe he was just better at hiding it. But either way, he seemed relieved to spend his days letting Aimsey show him around the palace, dragging him down hallways and into small rooms filled with things like old armor and clothes of all shapes and sizes. Meanwhile, Wilbur, Jack, and Ranboo would follow behind like awkward ducks in a line, except Jack wasn't so much awkward as he was annoyed, and Wilbur just didn't want to let Tommy out of his sight. So it was really only Ranboo who was awkward, which Wilbur was beginning to think was his default state of being.

Ranboo was a strange kid. He was careful not to falter with the names again, mostly only referring to Wilbur and Tommy as 'Your Highness' even when Tommy reassured him he could just call him Theseus. He often tripped over his own words, hands fluttering about while he stumbled through clunky sentences like he wasn't sure where to put them. But when he managed to spit out what he wanted to say, he was often sharing small quips that were actually pretty funny, or giving insightful comments about whatever part of the palace they were in at that moment.

He hung around Tommy more than he hung around Wilbur, which made sense given they were closer in age (Ranboo had told them on their third day that he was sixteen, and Tommy complained loudly about being the youngest in the group). Often during their walks through the palace, Aimsey, Ranboo, and Tommy would take the lead, while Wilbur hung back with Jack. This was surprisingly beneficial, but not just for the chance at conversation with someone closer to his own age.

Instead, these talks gave Wilbur something far more valuable than just a shallow sense of companionship.

"And so then I'm like, 'you're a fuckin' idiot, you're gonna freeze solid if you go out there,' and the bloke tells me, 'nah mate, I'm built different.' And, like, I get being built different because I'm definitely built different, but *no one* is built to withstand those winds on the surface. It's fucking cold as shit out there, and this idiot nearly froze solid before we managed to get a rescue team out to drag him back in," Jack was saying, waving his hands wildly around his face as he spoke.

Wilbur, who was watching Tommy run down the hall to chase after Aimsey, hummed. "What a fucking idiot," he huffed, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I didn't even grow up here and I can tell going out on the surface is a terrible idea."

Jack nodded. "Exactly! But that's kind of the thing, you live here your whole life and you get a little too cocky about it all. Like, you go out on the surface once in your full snow gear and you think to yourself, 'oh it's not that bad.' But even with full gear on, the longest you can be outside for is five minutes. This dumbass wasn't even wearing his snow gear and thought he could make it a full two minutes."

"You seem to know a lot about the specifics of this stuff," Wilbur commented, keeping his face neutral as he watched Aimsey tug Tommy over to a large window that looked out over the city. "The exact times and all."

“Anyone who joins the Royal Guard or the military has that stuff drilled into their head, since one of the only reasons you’d go to the surface would be for either military or guard-related stuff.”

“And anyone can join the Royal Guard or military here? Or are there specific requirements?”

“Well, just about anyone can join the military if you’re a citizen of Zephys IV, and citizens from other planets in the empire mostly can join too, they just have to go through some interviews and shit,” Jack explained, straightening his shoulders. “But the Royal Guard is different. You gotta go through lots of training for this job, and you can’t just apply outright. You gotta get recommended by your superior officer in the military.”

The pride was practically dripping from his words, and Wilbur fought to hide his smile as a gold-lined path was laid out in his mind’s eye. “Is it unusual for someone as young as you to land a job in the Royal Guard?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m one of the youngest guards we have,” Jack told him, grinning widely now. “Joined military training when I was sixteen, and got recommended for the Royal Guard when I was seventeen. That doesn’t happen to most people.”

“You’re allowed to join the military at sixteen?” Wilbur asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Kind of. You wouldn’t actually get sent out for active duty until you’re at least eighteen, but you can start training and take up a position in the base here, though you pretty much just do grunt work.”

They turned a corner, and Wilbur watched Ranboo point at some random door before diving off into a tangent about presumably whatever was behind it. Wilbur couldn’t hear it from where he was standing, but judging by the glazed over look in Tommy’s eyes, it probably wasn’t anything particularly useful to know.

So instead, Wilbur kept his focus on Jack. “Why did you join the military?”

Jack shrugged. “I mean, it’s a pretty sweet gig. You get food, a place to live, and a damn good salary.”

Wilbur tilted his head to the side at that. “Is finding jobs difficult here?”

“Eh, I wouldn’t say it’s difficult, but you don’t have a ton of options. If you’re smart, you become a doctor or a teacher. If you’re good at building, you become an engineer or a metal welder. And if you’re strong, you work in the mines. Those are the jobs that are easiest to get into down here,” Jack explained, glancing at Wilbur. “And if that all sounds dead fucking boring to you, you go into the military.”

“Mines?” Wilbur asked, furrowing his brows.

“Yeah, have you not seen the mining tunnels?” Jack questioned. Wilbur shook his head, and he scoffed before leading Wilbur over to the window the kids had been at earlier.

The city looked the same as it had the first day Wilbur had rode the train into the palace. The sharp metal points on top of the buildings stretched towards the even sharper ice spikes dangling from the ceiling, a few so close it reminded Wilbur of two hands reaching out, just barely brushing their fingertips together. Along the ground, there was more metal sprawled out into a crowded metropolis, and his eyes skimmed the entire view, searching for the mines Jack had mentioned.

“Look at the walls of the cavern,” Jack said after a few moments, pointing out the window.

Shifting his gaze to the right, Wilbur eyed the rippling blue and white patterns of the ice cavern wall, letting his eyes fall until he finally spotted what Jack was talking about. Sure enough, there were dozens of tunnels carved into the ice that branched out in different directions, probably leading much further out than Wilbur could even imagine.

“You’re a mining planet,” Wilbur said, unsure how he hadn’t been aware of that before.

Jack nodded. “Yup. Lotta minerals under all this ice.”

Committing that small fact to memory, Wilbur nodded before turning away from the window. “Earlier you said it was easier to join the military if you’re a citizen of Zephyr IV. I presume that just means if you were born here?”

“No actually,” Jack said, and Wilbur looked at him in surprise. “I mean, yes, being born here pretty much means you’re a citizen, but anyone over the age of thirty-five was almost definitely not born here. So if you’re only defining citizenship as meaning you were born here, you’d be losing over half our population.”

Wilbur frowned. “Why is that?”

Before Jack could answer, another voice from behind them cut him off.

“Wilbur, get your ass over here! They have a library and I know your nerdy ass would like that!” Tommy shouted.

Glancing over his shoulder, Wilbur spotted Tommy across the hall, waving him towards the door Ranboo had been pointing at earlier. It was now open, and through the doorway Wilbur could see gleaming black desks lining the walls, each with a holo-pad resting in the center of it.

Holy shit. A *library*. Maybe they’d have history books on the Antarctic Empire in here. If that was the case, then Wilbur had just hit the jackpot.

Abandoning his attempt to get information out of Jack, Wilbur hurried over to the doorway where Tommy was waiting for him. Aimsey and Ranboo were already inside, and Tommy led him over to the desk Aimsey was currently hunched over, the two stopping behind their chair.

“What are you reading?” Tommy asked, resting his hands on the back of the chair to lean over their shoulder, trying to see the holo-pad screen.

“Oh! It’s a book on flora biology. I actually brought it here, I was just checking on it,” Aimsey explained, tilting the screen towards the two of them.

Wilbur, who already knew plenty about the flora, glanced at the other holo-pads on the desks. “Are those all different books?”

Aimsey nodded. “Yup! Each holo-pad holds a category for books, so you can look through the digital library each one holds and find something you’re interested in reading.”

“Do they have a category for history?”

“We, uh, have plenty of history books,” Ranboo cut in, giving Wilbur a sheepish smile as he grabbed another holo-pad and held it out to him. “There’s the history of Enderians, history of Floslium, I’m pretty sure there’s a book on blaziphane in there, and even a few books on Elytra.”

Humming, Wilbur tapped on the screen, pulling up a search bar and typing a word into it. “Wow, that’s interesting stuff.” Stuff he wasn’t interested in, but stuff he was going to pretend he cared about anyway.

Making sure to keep the holo-pad angled away from Ranboo, Wilbur typed in, ‘Zephys IV’ to see if any books came up. After a few seconds of loading, nothing popped up, and Wilbur bit back a sigh as he typed in ‘Antarctic Empire.’

Still nothing.

His annoyance must’ve flashed across his face, because Ranboo then said, “Do you need help finding something specific?”

Trying to appear casual, Wilbur shrugged. “Jack just mentioned something about mines here on Zephys IV, so I was just trying to look up if you had any history books on this planet itself.”

At this, Ranboo chuckled. “Oh, you’re not gonna find any history books on Zephys IV.”

Wilbur frowned. “Why not?”

“Because no one’s written them yet,” Ranboo explained, smiling at him. “I know some books are in the process of being written, but according to Techno it really hasn’t been that long since we really *became* Zephys IV, at least in government terms, so there’s not a lot to write about just yet.”

Great. So Wilbur’s inability to find any information on Zephys IV wasn’t solely because they were a secretive planet, but because there were literally no books written on their history yet. That was annoying.

Still, Ranboo had mentioned they had history books on the planet Elytra, which wasn’t easy information to obtain. It seemed that for the time being that would have to suffice, so with a suppressed sigh, Wilbur settled himself in the desk next to Aimsey and pulled up a book on the former planet.

“Are you really just gonna sit and read a book right now?” Tommy whined over his shoulder.

“What else do you suggest we do?” Wilbur asked, shooting him a pointed look. “It’s not exactly like we have anywhere to be.”

Tommy pouted. “But it’s so fucking boring!”

“It’s been nearly a week since your last set of lessons, right?” Wilbur suddenly asked, making Tommy’s eyes go wide.

“Uh, well, yeah but I had plenty of reasons not to do my lessons,” Tommy said, chuckling awkwardly.

“Well obviously,” Wilbur huffed. “I wasn’t saying that. But since we’re in a library right now it might be a good idea for you to try and catch up.”

Tommy’s face scrunched up at that, as if he’d just tasted something sour. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Annoyance sparked through Wilbur, and he tried to shove it down, but it growled back with a vengeance as he looked at Tommy’s pouty expression. He didn’t want to be a hardass on him, but given their current situation, Tommy needed this kind of information now more than ever.

“Tommy, come here,” Wilbur said, gesturing for Tommy to come closer.

Nervousness danced in his eyes as he crept over, bending down so Wilbur could whisper in his ear.

“What exactly do you think running around with Ranboo and Aimsey all day is going to do for you the next time we’re trying to negotiate with Philza?” Wilbur hissed, narrowing his eyes. “It’s not going to fucking help anything, that’s for sure. Unless you want to make yourself look like the idiotic child they think you are.”

Tommy winced. “But I was just-”

“This isn’t a game anymore, Tommy,” Wilbur continued, cutting him off. “Before you were able to run around and shirk your responsibilities without needing to worry because you didn’t have to know all those things yet. But now you do. We are in a *very* precarious situation here, and we need to be trying to do everything we can to ensure our negotiations go well.”

There was a moment of silence as Tommy glared at him, jaw clenched and fists hanging at his sides. It was obvious he wanted to argue, but his eyes kept darting between Aimsey and Ranboo on either side of them, and Wilbur appreciated that he at least had the tact to recognize that this wasn’t the place to get into this kind of discussion.

So instead, Tommy let out a breath between his teeth, his shoulders slumping as he forced himself to relax. Then, with one more dirty look shot Wilbur’s way, he sat down at the desk beside him and picked up a holo-pad.

“What do you want me to read?” Tommy asked, his voice robotic.

Wilbur ignored the way his dead tone grated against his ears, so flat and wrong and utterly *un-Tommy*. He leaned over Tommy’s shoulder, skimming through the library and pulling up a book on political philosophy he’d read a few years earlier. It wasn’t much, but it would give Tommy an idea for some form of strategy while Wilbur tried to figure out if he could make a reading list or something for him.

Fuck. A *reading list*? Wilbur was trained to be an advisor, but he wasn’t supposed to be Tommy’s tutor. That wasn’t Tommy’s fault and Wilbur knew that, but there was yet another spike of annoyance, and he snapped his mouth shut before he got the chance to say anything that would piss Tommy off even more than he already was.

As both Wilbur and Tommy turned their focus onto their books, above his head, Wilbur could practically feel the awkward look Aimsey and Ranboo were sharing. The air was thick with tension, Tommy hunching over like there was an invisible thundercloud storming right above him.

They ended up staying in the library for a few hours, although Wilbur struggled to focus on the book in front of him. After the first half hour, Tommy slumped more in his chair, readjusting to get comfortable as he actually got absorbed in the words. Wilbur wished he could’ve done the same, but his mind was buzzing with too many questions for him to think straight.

When were they going to see Philza and Technoblade again? How receptive was he going to be to their refusal to let him control blaziphanes? Were either of them going to take Tommy seriously at all? Would they even take *Wilbur* seriously? Were the other planets going to get involved now that they were aware of what Dream had done to Eldingvegr? If so, what would that look like?

Wilbur was relieved when Jack called out to let them know that it was time for dinner. He gratefully set down his holo-pad, and the four of them trailed out in silence. Tommy refused to look at him, and only spoke up after Aimsey asked what his favorite food back on Eldingvegr was.

Once dinner ended, they parted ways with Aimsey and Ranboo, letting Jack lead them back to their room although Wilbur was pretty sure he could get himself there without a guide now. They said quiet goodbyes to Jack, before they both entered their bedroom, the door sliding shut behind Wilbur with a soft hiss.

Like a bubble that had been waiting to burst, the second they were alone, Tommy whirled around on him.

“Idiotic child? Really?” Were the first words out of his mouth.

Wilbur blinked. “Is that really what you’re hung up on?”

Tommy scowled. “Yes! You said Philza and Technoblade view me like an idiotic child!”

“Because they do, and I’m pretty sure they view me the same way,” Wilbur huffed, taking off his teal coat to hang it in the closet (they’d been given clothes tailored for them specifically the day before, although they were all still in Antarctic fashion and colors for the most part). “And if you keep spending all your time fucking around with your friends, that opinion isn’t going to change.”

“I’m not fucking around! I’m trying to learn the layout of the palace!” Tommy exclaimed, glaring at him.

“Don’t bullshit me. That’s only part of it,” Wilbur said, rolling his eyes as he sat down on the bed. “You just want to run around with Aimsey and Ranboo so you can pretend like nothing’s wrong.”

Tommy narrowed his eyes. “I’m not allowed to try and have some fun with the only goddamn friend I have in this place?”

“Considering we’re at the mercy of a ruthless Emperor right now, I wouldn’t say it’s exactly the time to have fun,” Wilbur scoffed, anger bubbling inside his chest.

“Then when am I allowed to have fun, Wilbur?” Tommy challenged, now pacing the length of the room. “When am I allowed to take a fucking breather? In case you forgot, I was going to be fucking *executed* less than a week ago!”

“I was going to be executed too!” Wilbur shouted, suddenly jumping to his feet. “We were both going to be killed in case you forgot, and *I’m* the one who got us out! I’m the one who saved our asses, I’m the one who got us off Eldingvegr, and I’m the one who took us to Zephyrs IV. But you don’t see me stopping to ‘take a breather!’”

“Maybe if you did you wouldn’t have such a stick up your ass,” Tommy muttered under his breath.

Heat rushed to Wilbur’s head as his vision flashed red. He stormed forward, Tommy shrinking back when he saw the anger blazing across Wilbur’s face, and winced as Wilbur leaned down so they were face to face.

“Why do you think I have a stick up my ass, huh, Tommy?” Wilbur asked, staring Tommy down. “Do you think I want to be harping on you like this? Because I don’t, but I’m trying to keep us *alive*. What the fuck do you not get about that?”

Tommy’s face twisted into a snarl, and next thing Wilbur knew, he was stumbling back with the force of Tommy shoving him.

“You don’t need to be such an asshole about it!” Tommy said, glaring at him.

Wilbur was clenching his jaw so hard, it was starting to ache. “Don’t shove me like that again,” he warned in a low voice.

As if only just realizing what he did, the anger disappeared from Tommy’s face for a moment, his eyes going wide with shock. Then, his cheeks flushed red, and his scowl



returned as he turned and rushed to the bathroom.

“I’m gonna take a shower,” he grumbled, slamming the door shut behind him.

And just like that, Wilbur was alone.

Letting out a shaky breath, he buried his face in his hands, groaning into his palms at how badly that had gone. He meant what he said. He didn’t like playing the hardass. But Tommy was frustrating him to no end.

Inside the bathroom, Wilbur heard the water start. He sat back down on the bed, kicking off his shoes and twisting his fingers into his hair. He was exhausted. The waiting was killing him, and all he wanted was to bury himself under his blankets and never come back out because it would be easier than dealing with the absolute shitfest that was his life right then.

A knock on the door startled him out of his thoughts.

Tension threaded itself between Wilbur’s shoulders as he got to his feet again, heart pounding in his chest at the possibility that Jack was on the other side, waiting to take him to Philza and Technoblade. He wouldn’t call on them this late at night, right? And Tommy was still in the bathroom. They wouldn’t take the delay as a slight against the two of them, right?

Wilbur took leaden steps to the door, taking a deep breath to try and steady himself before pressing the button to slide it open.

Relief practically slammed into Wilbur like a truck when he saw Aimsey standing on the other side instead of Jack.

“Hi Wil,” they said, giving him a small wave. “I hope I’m not bothering you?”

Blinking, Wilbur shook his head. “No, not at all. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, nothing’s wrong! I just wanted to check in on you and Tommy since things seemed a little tense after the library today,” they explained, the flowers on their cheeks perking up as they rocked back and forth on their heels.

“It’s, uh, yeah, it’s fine,” Wilbur reassured them, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just usual bickering. You know how it is.”

Aimsey’s dark brows furrowed together. “It didn’t seem like the way I’ve seen you two bicker before.”

“Well, it’s been four years. Things change,” Wilbur pointed out, wincing when his words came out just a bit sharper than he meant them to.

Aimsey didn’t seem bothered by his tone though. “I’m not blind. I know you and Tommy are both really stressed out.”

Wilbur huffed. “Yeah, no shit. Our planet got taken over by one power-hungry emperor, and now we’re trying to negotiate with another for help. This isn’t exactly a vacation for us.”

“So that leads to you snapping at each other, right?” Aimsey asked, folding their arms over their chest.

Leaning against the doorway, Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “Aimsey, Tommy’s taking a shower right now, so if you want to talk to him you might as well just wait for tomorrow.”

At this, Aimsey frowned. “You’re my friend too, Wilbur. I’m worried about both of you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but it’s not your concern.”

“It is my concern though. You’re both my friends and you’re dealing with a lot right now and-”

“It’s not the concern for someone who is part of the Antarctic Empire,” Wilbur snapped, cutting them off.

Aimsey fell silent, understanding dawning over their face. A beat passed as they stared at one another, before Aimsey took a step back.

“So that’s what this is about,” they said quietly. “You don’t trust me.”

“It’s nothing personal, but we haven’t seen you in four years. We’re quite literally in the middle of negotiations with the Emperor at the moment, so forgive me for not wanting to spill all my thoughts to another member of the Empire,” Wilbur said, meeting their eyes steadily.

For a moment, hurt flashed over Aimsey’s face. Their shoulders drooped, and their eyes ducked to the ground as they curled in on themselves. Guilt panged in Wilbur’s chest, but he wasn’t lying when he said that, and he didn’t intend on taking it back.

After a few beats, Aimsey straightened their shoulders again. “That’s fine. I- I get it. Kinda hurts, but I understand where you’re coming from. There’s not a lot of people you can trust right now,” they said, fiddling with the hem of their sleeve. “Just... try not to be too hard on Tommy, okay? I think this whole thing is bothering him a lot more than he’s letting on, so just keep that in mind.”

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “I think I know my own brother better than you, but thanks.”

To Aimsey’s credit, they didn’t flinch at this, and just nodded. “Fair enough. Try to take care of yourself too though. If you ever just wanna complain, you don’t have to tell me details, but like I said I’m not only Tommy’s friend.”

And with that, Aimsey turned and headed back down the hallway, their footsteps fading into silence.

Wilbur shut the door once more, before collapsing onto his side of the bed with a loud grunt. He dragged his hands down his face, one part of his mind screaming at him for being rude to the only friend they had on this entire planet, while the other part praised him for being cautious of them.

He didn't trust Aimsey. Not fully. But he trusted them more than he trusted anyone else in the entire palace besides Tommy. Hopefully he hadn't just ruined that.

It wasn't long before the water from the shower stopped. Wilbur didn't react as the door to the bathroom opened, only kept his eyes on the ceiling as he watched Tommy rub a towel on his head from his peripheral vision.

"Have a nice shower?" Wilbur tried after Tommy had tossed the towel aside.

Tommy didn't say anything. He climbed under the blankets, keeping his back to Wilbur as he settled his wet hair onto the pillow.

"Are you ignoring me now?" Wilbur asked, pushing himself up on his elbow.

Silence.

Well, guess that answered that question.

Sighing, Wilbur got off the bed to change into his own pajamas. Then, he climbed under the blankets, watching Tommy's back as his shoulders rose and fell in a steady rhythm. He wasn't sleeping, Wilbur could tell that much, but he was pretending to be asleep.

Maybe Wilbur should've tried to apologize. But all his anger and frustration from earlier was still tangled up in his chest into a tight ball, one that he was too exhausted to try and unwrap at this time. So he shut the lights off and settled his own head on the pillow, turning onto his side so they were both facing away from the other.

"Night Tommy," Wilbur said into the empty air.

Still no response.

Shutting his eyes, Wilbur did his breathing exercises until the waves stopped crashing over and over again in his mind. Then, he let himself drift off to sleep.



Wilbur was woken by a scream.

Bolting upright in the dark room, Wilbur's thoughts were bleary with sleep as he tried to make out shapes in the shadows. His heart was pounding wildly in his ears as he looked around for the source of the sound, whipping his head from side to side until he noticed the trembling figure sitting next to him.

"Tommy? What's wrong?"

Tommy took a shuddering breath, followed by a few short gasps. It took Wilbur's half-asleep brain a second to process it, but then he realized Tommy was crying.

"Hey, what's going on?" Wilbur asked, his voice softer this time.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy gasped out, words muffled by the hands he had on his face. “Didn’t- I didn’t want to wake you up.”

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Wilbur saw that Tommy was curled into a ball with his hands around his knees, while his shoulders trembled violently.

“You don’t need to apologize. What’s going on?”

A hiccup bubbled out of Tommy’s chest. “Nightmare,” he whispered.

A pang shot through Wilbur’s chest hearing that. He reached out, but hesitated before he went to pull Tommy’s hands away from his face. “Is touch okay?”

Tommy peeked out from behind his hands, the soft glow of his freckles making the tears in his eyes glitter. Then, he nodded once, and Wilbur reached out to grab Tommy’s hands in his own. But before he could do that, Tommy suddenly launched himself at Wilbur, and Wilbur grunted in surprise as Tommy wrapped his arms around him in one of the tightest hugs he’d ever given him.

“I’m- I’m sorry I shoved you,” Tommy sobbed into his shirt, the words coming out a garbled mess. “I know you’re trying to help and I’m just being a fucking asshole-”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Wilbur whispered, cutting Tommy off as he ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry too. I was definitely harder on you than I should’ve been.”

This just made Tommy cry harder, and Wilbur tried to comfort him the best he could. He readjusted so he was sitting against the headboard of the bed, with Tommy having buried his face in his shoulder while twisting his fingers into Wilbur’s shirt.

There nagging in the back of Wilbur’s head, telling him that there had to be something more going on. Because Tommy wouldn’t be this upset about the fight they had earlier. Not when they’d had fights far worse than that before. There had to be more to it.

“Are you okay? I didn’t think our fight was this bad,” Wilbur asked, keeping his voice as low and gentle as he could.

Tommy said something in response, but Wilbur couldn’t make out what it was since his face was still buried in his shirt.

“What was that? Can you say that again?”

Pulling his head out from Wilbur’s shoulder, Tommy sniffled once, letting go of his shirt to wipe some of the snot off his nose. “The dream I had-” another sniffle, “it was bad. Really bad.”

Wilbur frowned. “Bad in what way?”

With the glow of Tommy’s freckles, Wilbur could just make out his little brother’s lower lip trembling as he stared into Wilbur’s eyes.

"It- It was-" his breathing hitched, "it was you. Dream he- I was stuck and we'd been caught and- I couldn't- I couldn't move and he just-" Another gasp for breath. "He killed you, Wilbur! Right in front of me! And I couldn't do anything to stop it!"

Oh.

*Oh.*

Neither one of them had had nightmares about the invasion since they'd gotten out of the crawlspace, but Wilbur supposed it was only a matter of time.

"Oh Tommy," Wilbur whispered, guilt crashing over him as he pulled Tommy close again. Tommy crumpled into him, more sobs breaking out from his chest as Wilbur rested his chin on top of his head. "I'm right here. It's fine. Dream can't get us here."

"But- But even if he can't, Philza could kill us," Tommy cried.

Wilbur winced. That was painfully true.

"At the moment, Philza has no reason to kill us," Wilbur said in a weak attempt at reassurance. "And as long as we're smart, we won't give him a reason, okay?"

Tommy nodded, the shaking in his shoulders slowing down.

"I'm sorry if I scared you earlier," Wilbur continued, twirling a blonde curl around his finger. "I was just trying to get my point across but I think I got a little too intense about it."

"It's okay," Tommy told him. "You were a bit of an asshole, but I was too."

Wilbur snorted softly. "Guess you take after me in that way."

"I think you're a bit bitchier than me," Tommy teased, the tears having stopped entirely now.

"Excuse me, you're the rude one of the two of us," Wilbur shot back, making sure to keep his voice low even as they joked.

"Yeah, but you're more petty than I am."

Wilbur rolled his eyes even though Tommy couldn't see it in the dark. "That's fair. Niki always said I was-"

He cut himself off at the mention of Niki, while Tommy stiffened in his arms. Anxiety crawled up his throat as he thought back to the betrayal in her eyes, and his chest ached as he buried his face in Tommy's hair.

"D'you think Niki's okay?" Tommy whispered, curling back into him.

"I'm sure she is," Wilbur said, although the words sounded clunky and false even to himself. "Dream wouldn't risk pissing Themis off by hurting her."

“We used to think Dream wouldn’t go after Eldingvegr because he wouldn’t want to fuck up the blaziphane trade, and look where that got us,” Tommy muttered, making Wilbur’s chest squeeze.

Ignoring the rock that dropped into his stomach at that, Wilbur leaned further back against his pillow, keeping Tommy tucked into his side. “All we can do right now is hope for the best.”

Tommy made a disgruntled noise as he readjusted himself, his nose tucked into Wilbur’s shoulder. “I don’t like that plan.”

“I don’t like it either,” Wilbur whispered.



Another few days passed before they finally got the summons they’d been waiting for.

Leaving Aimsey and Ranboo behind, Wilbur and Tommy followed Jack to the negotiations room again. Since their fight, Tommy was trying to be better about reading the things Wilbur told him to, but he got distracted very easily so he hadn’t been making much progress.

Unfortunately, Wilbur hadn’t been making much progress either. Every time he tried to sit down and read, all he could think about were all the ways their negotiations could go wrong. Now that they were going to see Philza and Technoblade again, it was near impossible for Wilbur to just focus on breathing.

Fear slid between his ribs ice cold like a shock to the system. Tommy was pressed against his side as they walked, and despite the neutral mask that was plastered over his face, Wilbur could read the lines of tension in his jaw as clear as day.

Much like last time, when they entered the room, Philza and Technoblade were already waiting for them. Philza was still seated, while Techno was standing this time, resting his hand on the back of a chair and watching the brothers with narrowed eyes. Something that immediately set Wilbur on edge was the fact that unlike before, there wasn’t the faintest hint of a smile on Philza’s face. Instead, his cold eyes practically pierced through Wilbur as he gestured for them to sit.

“Okay, let’s not waste any time with the bullshit today,” Philza said before either Wilbur or Tommy could say anything in greeting. “To put it bluntly, we’re going to have to put our negotiations on hold for quite a bit.”

Wilbur tensed in his seat. “Why? Did something happen?”

“Well, not much has happened yet,” Technoblade clarified. “But something is *going* to be happening very soon that’s gonna delay things.”

“Zephys IV is holding a diplomatic conference with several planets that are under Antarctic rule, along with our closest allies,” Philza continued, tapping his talons on the table. “Since the news about Eldingvegr became public information, I informed my territories and our allies about the fact that you and your brother have taken refuge with me. Naturally, this

opened up a lot of questions, and I realized it would be a good idea to discuss my plans with the other planets within my Empire before we proceed with our own negotiations.”

Wait, *what*?

“You told others that we’re here?!” Tommy asked before Wilbur could. “Are you fucking crazy? Dream’s gonna find out-”

“It doesn’t matter if Dream knows you’re here or not,” Technoblade cut in. “He’s not going to attack Zephyr IV, no matter how much of an arrogant idiot he is. We could tell him exactly what room in the palace you’re both staying in and he wouldn’t be able to do a thing.”

“But if it’s any reassurance, those I have told are people who I trust won’t go running their mouths off,” Philza explained, his wings stretching out again behind him. “You both being here wasn’t going to stay a secret for long. Especially not now, considering diplomats are going to be arriving for the summit in a few days.”

Wilbur blinked, the full weight of Philza’s words hitting him all at once. “So they’re coming *here*?”

Philza nodded. “Yes. We’re still finalizing who is going to show up, but there are going to be quite a few conferences in the coming week. Ones that you both are going to be expected to show up to, alongside myself and Techno.”

“Why us?” Tommy asked, frowning at Philza.

“Because everyone wants to know what happened on Eldingvegr, and right now, you are the only two people we know of who escaped the takeover,” Technoblade explained, a few of the strands in his braids having fallen loose over his face. “Not to mention, Prince Theseus *is* the heir, so he is the one who will need to speak on your planet’s behalf.”

“Will these be a continuation of our negotiations?” Wilbur then questioned.

“Not exactly. I need to go over my own plans regarding the negotiations with the other leaders before we push forward with our discussions,” Philza answered, meeting Wilbur’s eyes head on. “All you two need to do is be present and ready to answer questions. Though I’m sure you recognize the opportunities meeting so many different planet leaders would provide you, right, Prince Orpheus?”

Yes. Wilbur did recognize the opportunities this would open. Potential allies, or potential enemies depending on how well these discussions went. A chance to gain a larger political foothold in the galaxy outside of the influence of Zephyr IV, although they wouldn’t be that far from Philza’s influence given that all these planets were either under Antarctic rule or allied with the Empire itself.

Still, it was a chance to learn and make connections. This opportunity was invaluable.

“We are grateful to you for allowing us to participate in these conferences,” Wilbur said, not breaking eye contact with Philza as he spoke. “We’ll make sure to take full advantage of what

it can provide us with.”

And then, there was Philza’s razor sharp smile once more.

“I knew you would.”

Despite the dangerous glint in Philza’s eyes, for just the briefest of moments Wilbur could’ve sworn there was something like pride in the emperor’s voice. Not a warm kind of pride though. No, this pride was almost akin to jealousy, but not quite bitter enough for it.

It was the kind of pride a predator would have after a successful hunt, as it dragged around a carcass that could keep its family fed for weeks.

But as quickly as it was there, it was gone. Wilbur did his best to convince himself he’d imagined it, but the shudder running down his spine said otherwise.

## Chapter End Notes

ok this was more of a filler chapter for sure, but I really hope you guys like how it turned out! next chapter things get fun when we finally get introduced to all the other planet leaders hehe, so I'm really excited to introduce them :D

hope you guys enjoyed!! stuff is really going to start picking up from here so look forward to that

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

I have a playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)!

please leave me a comment if you enjoyed!! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <33

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees



# out with the old in with the new

## Chapter Summary

The leaders arrive for the conference.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi everyone!! look I have more food for you!!!

man, ngl I was so excited to write this chapter but it was also way harder than I thought it would be. I'm very happy with how it turned out, but damn I'm balancing a LOT of characters in this one lmaoooo. hope you guys are excited though! we're gonna be seeing a lot of new faces in this one

thank you all so much for the love and support you've shown me so far on this, it really means the world because this fic is really my baby. also, if you want to learn more about my writing process for this fic, yesterday (june 16th 2022) I was on @thanotaphobia's stream along with a bunch of other really awesome writers! I talked a bit about things like prose and word choice for stars, and also a bit about my writing in general, so if you're interested in getting some 'director's commentary' make sure to go check out the vod for that!

so anyway hope you guys enjoy this chapter! it's a fun one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tomorrow we will see the arrival of ten representatives from six different planets,” Philza told them, folding his hands in front of him.

It had been two days since Philza had first informed them about the upcoming conference. Since that day, Wilbur had been extending Tommy’s reading list, while also trying to brush up on foreign policy himself. Except until now, Philza hadn’t told them exactly who would be showing up. He claimed this was because he wasn’t sure exactly who was going to be able to make the conference on such short notice, but Wilbur couldn’t help but wonder if he did it specifically so they wouldn’t have enough time to research the planets beforehand.

They were sitting in the negotiations room that Wilbur was already starting to loathe. Tommy was squirming uncomfortably beside him, his nerves visible in the way he was bouncing his leg under the table. It was one thing to go to the leader of an Empire and beg him to grant you

asylum when your life was on the line, but it was another to actually meet planetary leaders in a diplomatic setting and insert yourself into the heart of political games.

Again, it was nearly impossible to find information regarding the Antarctic Empire from outside sources. Wilbur had no clue how many planets were under Antarctic rule, all he knew was that it was a steadily increasing number that had worried the entire galaxy—at least until Dream took over the Essempi Empire and everyone's focus shifted to him instead. He wondered if he would recognize the names of any of the planets that were going to arrive at Zephyrs IV, or if they would all be completely unfamiliar to him.

He hoped for familiarity. He hoped to find some kind of footing along this ever shifting sea of power plays and careful words he found himself constantly slipping in. He hoped that for at least one day, he might not be completely lost as to what he was supposed to do next.

"Which planets will be there?" Wilbur asked, leaning back in his seat.

"The first is one you probably haven't heard of," Philza began, stretching his wings out behind him. "It's a smaller planet located in the Outer Sector called Serenity."

Wilbur furrowed his brows. He wasn't familiar with the name.

Seeing the confusion on his face, Philza continued. "They're not particularly known for anything save for their agricultural exports, but they're an extremely useful planet that we use as an outpost to keep an eye on the Outer Sector."

"Alright, who else?" Tommy cut in, still bouncing his leg.

"Mantle."

"The name rings a bell, but I'm not sure where I've heard it from," Wilbur told him, tilting his head to the side.

"They're not technically a planet, but a moon to a gas giant," Technoblade explained, fiddling with the rings on his fingers. "They figured out a way to harvest the gas from their gas giant and turn it into energy. Got rich off of it, so they're big players in the galaxy-wide economy as a whole."

Huh.

"Interesting," Wilbur nodded. "Who next?"

"Well," Philza smirked. "Are you familiar with Kinoko Kingdom?"

Beside him, Tommy stiffened, while Wilbur's eyes widened. While Eldingvegr never had much in the way of direct relations with Kinoko Kingdom, Wilbur knew enough about them to know they were a very wealthy planet with plenty of influence on the larger galaxy. He completely forgot that they had been put under Antarctic rule several years earlier. That... That was a foolish thing for him to forget. Especially given their current situation.

“You took over the planet a few years ago, right?” Wilbur asked after a few moments, trying to hide the surprise on his face.

“We did,” Technoblade nodded. “Those mushrooms they export provide a lot of profit for us.”

Ah yes. Wilbur remembered learning about the hallucinogenic properties of several mushroom species found only on Kinoko. They were sought after for the feelings of euphoria they could produce, along with intense visions that some believed led to spiritual experiences. Extremely popular all throughout the galaxy, although Wilbur had never gotten the opportunity to try them himself. Not that he’d want to either. The idea of having visions of things that weren’t actually there terrified him. He’d rather stay grounded in reality, thank you very much.

“So you got Kinoko, Serenity, and Mantle, what are the other three planets?” Tommy pushed, clearly not eager to let the conversation drift.

“The next three planets are... well, they’re three moons that are separate from one another, but they all orbit the same gas giant—Caelus—and operate under one government,” Philza explained, his smile fading. “These planets are not under Antarctic rule, but they *are* allied with us. We will be hosting two representatives from each planet.”

“Collectively, they’re known as the Badlands,” Technoblade continued when Philza finished. “Individually though, you have Nona, Decima, and Morta.”

*The Badlands.* Now that was a name Wilbur was familiar with. Although he didn’t know much about the planets themselves, he remembered a period of time where Eret was checking the maps every single day to see if the Badlands had fallen under Essempi rule. Apparently, the Badlands were in rather close proximity to the heart of Essempi’s capital planet, which he could more than imagine was a primary reason Philza chose to ally with them.

“I’m familiar with the Badlands, although we haven’t had any direct discussions with them before,” Wilbur said, folding his hands in his lap. “So you’ve told all of these representatives that Tommy and I are here?”

“I have. They’re aware of the situation on Eldingvegr and that you have come to me requesting aid.” He leaned further back in his seat, readjusting the thin metal circlet on his hair. “However, I believe all of them will be interested in hearing that directly from you both.”

And he was going to be discussing his own plans for their negotiations with the leaders under his rule. Wilbur wasn’t going to forget that part of it. Despite being the Emperor, Philza seemed to be open to debate and conversation with the planets that were under his rule. That meant the leaders they were meeting would have Philza’s ear.

Slowly, a plan began to form in his mind.

“Can you tell us anything more about the leaders we’ll be meeting tomorrow?” Wilbur then questioned.

“You’ll find out for yourself soon enough,” Philza said, pinning Wilbur down with a knowing stare.

*You’re not going to find out anything I don’t want you to know*, is what his eyes said while his mouth stayed still.

Wilbur met his eyes as evenly as he could. *Fine. That’s more than enough to play your game with*, is what Wilbur silently replied with.

There wasn’t much more to discuss in the meeting after that, and since Philza wasn’t willing to share information on the actual leaders until they arrived, that meant they were soon dismissed. Wilbur walked back to his bedroom with his hand on Tommy’s shoulder, the plan slowly developing in his mind like fog dissipating over an ocean.

By the time they got back to their room, Wilbur was buzzing with energy. As soon as the door shut behind them both, Wilbur let go of Tommy and began to pace around the room, raking his fingers through his hair as his thoughts bounced around his mind.

“Okay,” he began, drawing his little brother’s attention before he could even sit on the bed, “we need to have a game plan going into this, got it?”

“I thought we were just gonna be telling them what happened on Eldingvegr. Why would we need a plan for that?” Tommy asked, frowning at Wilbur.

“C’mon Tommy, I want you to think about it. Philza is inviting these leaders over to discuss Eldingvegr. Not just what happened, but what he’s *going* to be doing about it,” Wilbur explained, walking from one wall and turning around to go to the other. “And not everyone coming is going to be under the rule of the Empire. The Badlands are only allied with them, remember?”

“I still don’t get where you’re going with this,” Tommy said, huffing as he plopped down on the edge of the bed.

Wilbur stopped pacing to meet Tommy’s eyes. “Philza needs to get approval on his negotiation plans with us.”

At that, Tommy’s eyes widened. “Wait, are you sure? Why would he need permission-” he cut himself off, gasping as the realization hit him. “The Badlands. He needs permission from his allies.”

“If he has any sort of military agreement with the Badlands, which I imagine he does since that’s literally three whole planets worth of soldiers, then he’s going to have to get approval from them if he’s going to send any kind of army to Eldingvegr,” Wilbur continued, giving Tommy an expectant look.

It was as if Wilbur could almost see the puzzle pieces falling into place in Tommy’s mind. “Then he would need them to approve whether he’s just going to chase out the Essempi army, or if he’s going to fully take Eldingvegr for himself.”

“And that means if we want to find a way to convince him not to put the blaziphane trade under full Empire rule, then our best shot is to try and get the Badlands to not agree to it,” Wilbur told him, throwing out his arms dramatically as he finished.

There was a beat as Tommy stared at him, pale brows scrunched together as he worked something out in his mind.

“But... how are we supposed to do that?” Tommy then asked.

Wilbur’s arms lowered, his thoughts slowing as he viewed the obstacle in his mind. There were several ways they could go about that. There was always the possibility of them striking a deal with the Badlands in secret, but their only bargaining chip would be something akin to ‘give them lower prices for blaziphane’ which was something Philza would be able to do if he were in charge of the trade instead, so that wouldn’t work. There was also the possibility of trying to instill a lack of confidence in Philza as a leader to the Badlands—to try and convince them the blaziphane trade would be destroyed under his rule—but Wilbur had no idea how they could even try to do that so it wouldn’t work either.

“It’s going to need to be something we’re very careful about,” Wilbur began, picking up the pacing once more. “I think our best option is going to be to try and balance the perception the other leaders have of you. You need to be sympathetic—you’re fifteen and were just violently deposed from your position as Crown Prince to the throne of Eldingvegr. You’re traumatized and just want the opportunity to go home again. They need to feel *bad* for you. But you can’t be too weak and helpless, or else they’ll think it would be better for Philza to step in and rule Eldingvegr for you. We need to show you as a competent leader to be who is the best fit to continue ruling the blaziphane trade not just because it’s your birthright, but because you deserve it.”

Resting his chin on a pillow, Tommy frowned. “I thought appealing to the emotional side of politics never worked?”

“Usually it doesn’t,” Wilbur agreed, still wearing a hole into the floor with his walking, “but there’s no real benefit in terms of profit or alliances that come with you retaining control instead of Philza, so we can’t negotiate with that. I think our only option here is going to be to try and provoke sympathy from the other leaders.”

“Wil, I don’t know as much about politics as you, but even I can tell that’s a pretty shit idea,” Tommy pointed out.

“People are more flawed than you realize, Tommy,” Wilbur argued. “Emotions have won out over logic millions of times throughout history. It’s just about knowing what kind of emotions will elicit the response you want.”

“I get what you’re saying, but I don’t think it’s that simple,” Tommy pushed, wrapping his arms tighter around his pillow. “Yeah, emotions can win out over logic. Duh. We fuckin’ know that. But you can’t always predict how emotions might make someone react. Like even if we do make someone feel sympathetic for me, that doesn’t automatically mean they’re gonna be on our side.”

“But it’s worth a shot though, don’t you think?”

Tommy shrugged. “I guess so.” He paused, biting his lip as he thought it over. “I mean, I guess people like to feel like they’re the hero in any given situation. Like, they wanna feel as if they’re the one helping someone out. So if we can figure out how to make someone feel like they’re helping us out by convincing Philza not to take over the blaziphane trade-”

“We can get them to do exactly that,” Wilbur finished for him, staring at Tommy with a wide smile. “Shit, that might actually work then!”

“I mean, we still gotta figure out how the fuck we can make someone feel like that,” Tommy said, still frowning.

“That’s not that hard. You just gotta try and be sympathetic but also look like you know what you’re doing. You need to make them like you,” Wilbur reassured him, walking over to the bed now.

“You say that like it’s easy,” Tommy scoffed.

Stopping in front of the bed, Wilbur placed his hands on Tommy’s shoulders, and bent down so they were eye to eye. “That should be so easy for you, Tommy. You had practically everyone on Eldingvegr wrapped around your finger.”

“I did?”

Wilbur stared blankly at his little brother for a moment, lines of confusion crinkling up around the corners of his eyes. Tommy was looking at him as if he’d grown three heads, and Wilbur didn’t understand. Of course Tommy had the entire palace wrapped around his finger. They practically worshipped the kid.

“Do you really not know the effect you have on people?” Wilbur whispered, frowning at him.

“They liked me because I was the Crown Prince,” Tommy said slowly, enunciating each word with the kind of care you would say to someone who might not be able to understand them.

Did... Did Tommy really not *know*?

“Of course they liked you for that, but that wasn’t the only reason,” Wilbur explained, squeezing his shoulders to try and get him to understand. “Sure, you can be annoying as shit sometimes, but if you’re actually trying? Everyone who meets you treats you like you’re their son or their little brother. There’s something about you that’s just... I don’t know, endearing, I suppose?”

At this, Tommy scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Don’t bullshit me, Wil. I’m loud, rude, obnoxious-”

“And you’re also funny, and compassionate, and excitable,” Wilbur cut in, giving him a pointed look. “If you’re not actively trying to piss people off, then they’ll do just about anything for you.”

“That’s not true. If I’m so fucking likeable, why did Eret try to have me killed?” Tommy challenged, something cracking in his voice.

Wilbur winced. “Eret... They’re a different story. They’ve known you since you were born, so they’re more ‘immune’ to that side of you.”

“You’ve known me since I was born though.”

“I’m your brother. It’s different,” Wilbur said, letting go of Tommy’s shoulders and sitting beside him on the bed. “I’m here to love you even when you’re being an obnoxious little shit.”

While that didn’t make the frown on Tommy’s face lessen, he slumped into Wilbur’s side anyway. “I still think you’re wrong. You’re the one who knows how to make people like you, not me.”

Wilbur huffed. “I can charm people, but it’s different from what you do. You’re genuine, and people can tell,” he tried to explain, wrapping an arm around Tommy’s shoulders to give him a side hug. “Besides, the leaders don’t need to like me at all, so that’s a moot point. This is gonna be all you.”

There was a beat as Tommy took a breath, considering Wilbur’s words. He tossed his pillow to the side and pulled his knees up to his chest.

“What if I play up the fact that my dad’s dead and the throne to Eldingvegr is kind of the last thing I have from him?” Tommy offered, looking up at Wilbur hopefully.

A slow grin spread over Wilbur’s face. “That’s brilliant. I knew you’d be a natural at this.”

Even though uncertainty was still dancing in Tommy’s eyes, his small smile was genuine all the same.



The next day, Wilbur and Tommy found themselves waiting in the Emperor’s throne room for the visitors to arrive.

Philza was sitting on his throne like he had been the first day they arrived. His wings were spread out behind him, the dark feathers glossy as could be as if they had been freshly preened. The front strands of his blonde hair had been braided back, with his metal circlet resting right above the carefully woven strands. Somehow, his eyes seemed even closer to the color of ice than usual, and Wilbur felt as though shards of that ice were slipping under his skin every time he met the Emperor’s gaze.

Beside him, Technoblade was every inch the terrifying Imperator he had looked the first day Wilbur and Tommy were introduced to him. The coat he wore that fell to his mid-calves was the same that it always was, save for the fact that the silver embroidery around the seams was much more intricate and noticeable than before. He stood with his shoulders straight and

braids falling down his back, while his gold eyes darted around the room, more alert than Wilbur had ever seen him before.

Wilbur and Tommy stood off to the side of the throne, hands folded behind their backs as they waited for the doors to slide open. It was eerily reminiscent of the dozens of times the two of them would stand in Eret's throne room, patiently waiting for the first guests to be presented to them all.

From the corner of his eye, Wilbur watched Tommy. His shoulders were back, his posture just as perfect as Eret always reminded him to keep it. He was going to be on his best behavior today, and while he did his best to charm the leaders, Wilbur was going to be doing what he could to gain information about all of them.

They were a team. As long as both of them played their parts, they could take full advantage of the opportunity being handed to them.

It had only been a few minutes since they all assumed their positions when the doors first opened.

Puffy led the way inside the throne room, her dark skirt swishing around her boots with every step. She bowed deeply to Philza, her horns poking out from her curls as they fell over her face. When she straightened back up, she pushed them back again, and met Philza's steady gaze.

"Your Majesty," she greeted, before turning to Technoblade. "Your Imperial Highness. Our guests have arrived."

"Then bring them in here," Philza said with a wave of his hand.

Nodding, Puffy took a few steps back so she was in the doorway. Then, she gestured for someone to come forward.

The first person to step into the room was a man. He had long, dark hair tied back into a loose ponytail at the nape of his neck, and a scruffy beard around his cheeks and neck. He was dressed in all black—black shirt, black coat, black harness over the shirt and jacket—and gave Philza a short bow in greeting.

"May I present: Michael McChill, Chancellor of Serenity," Puffy introduced.

"A pleasure to see you, Your Majesty and Your Imperial Highness," Michael said as he straightened up from his bow.

Philza gave him a nod of acknowledgement. "Pleasure to see you as well, Chancellor."

With that, Michael moved off to the side, standing next to Puffy as she waved for the next person to enter.

This time, two people entered instead of one.



The first was a young woman dressed in an intricate black and red coat that was clipped above her chest and fell to her ankles, with a short red and black dress underneath of it that fell to her mid-thighs. She also wore black ankle boots with a tall, square heel—a sharp contrast to the military boots everyone else here seemed to sport. The most eye-catching part of her attire though was the black, crown-like halo she wore on top of her long, dark hair—the headpiece shooting out like sun rays in the shape of a circle above her braided bun.

Beside her, there was a man wearing a red cloak that fell to his knees. It was intricately embroidered with black and gold stitching, creating a design of flowers and mushrooms all around it. He also wore a gold circlet in his light brown hair, and Wilbur noticed his eyes were such a bright shade of gold, they were almost the same color as Techno's.

That wasn't the unusual part about his eyes though. Yes, they were gold, but they also weren't focused on anything. He was staring off into space, a look of wonder cast over his expression as he stared not at Philza and Technoblade, but at a plain, stone pillar.

"May I present: Princess Tina, Duchess of Atramentaria, and Marquise Karl Amanita Jacobs, Seer of the Church of the Other and the Between."

"Your Majesty, Your Imperial Highness," Tina greeted as she curtsied at both Philza and Technoblade.

There was a beat of silence as everyone waited for Karl to greet them both. Tina glanced at him from the corner of her eye, elbowing his side and making him jump.

"Your Majesty... Your Imperial Highness... hi!" Karl said slowly, still struggling to focus his gaze as he bowed to them both. "Your walls are so pretty, they're made of the most beautiful rainbow crystal and—"

"He's currently straddling the line of the Other and the Between at the moment," Tina cut in, giving them both an apologetic smile.

"That's perfectly understandable," Philza reassured, smiling back at her. "Seer, I regret to inform you our walls are not actually made of rainbow crystal, but I hope you enjoy your time here all the same."

Karl's attention seemed to have already wandered away from Philza, his eyes once again roaming the walls. After a few beats of silence, his golden gaze fell onto Wilbur and Tommy, and he let out a sharp gasp.

"It's you two," he whispered, bringing a hand up to his mouth. "I've- I've seen you both before!" He let out a high-pitched giggle, while Tina grabbed his arm to hold him back. "Wow, this means things are going to get pretty exciting for you all very soon."

Wilbur had no idea what he was talking about, and neither did Tommy judging by the way he looked like he was frozen in place. Philza and Technoblade didn't seem bothered by his strange words though, while Tina seemed tired more than anything else.

“C’mon Karl, we can talk about that stuff later,” Tina whispered to him, leading him off to the side where Michael was standing.

Karl nodded, but didn’t tear his eyes away from Wilbur and Tommy. The brothers did their best to ignore him, but his gaze was like a physical weight on Wilbur’s shoulders. For some reason, Wilbur had the strangest sense he could see straight through him if he wanted to.

Coughing to clear her throat, Puffy took a breath before waving the next person in.

Or rather, *people*.

“May I present the Council of the Badlands: Councillor’s Sam and Ponk of Decima, Councillor’s BadBoyHalo and Skeppy of Morta, and Councillor’s Antfrost and Seapeekay of Nona.”

The Council entered in order of their introductions as Wilbur held his breath, eager to try and take in as much information about the Badlands as he could.

The first two that entered—Sam and Ponk—looked entirely human. The man he guessed was Sam had green hair the color of a forest, and eyes that were such a dark shade of brown they almost seemed black. Ponk’s nearly white hair contrasted sharply with their darker skin, and Wilbur noticed that one of their arms was metallic—looking as though it were made of a mix between gold and silver. The two of them wore similarly cut coats that fell to their knees. Ponk’s was embroidered with silver stitching, and Sam’s was embroidered with gold. Along with that, both of them had metal masks covering the lower halves of their faces—Sam’s being pure gold, and Ponk’s being bright red.

Next, Wilbur assumed the two that entered were BadBoyHalo and Skeppy, and neither of them were anything even close to human. Bad was impossibly tall—even taller than Ranboo—and he wore a black and red hooded cloak that fell to the floor, pooling in rich piles of fabric around his ankles. His face was shrouded in shadow by the hood, showing only a pair of glowing white eyes in the darkness. In contrast, while Skeppy wore a similar cloak in shades of blue and silver, his hood was pulled back so his face was visible. While he seemed human at first glance, Wilbur quickly picked up on the bright clusters of turquoise crystals that grew out of his skin in different patches, and recalled hearing something about a gem-like species that rarely left their home planet.

Lastly, Antfrost and Seapeekay entered. Neither one of them was human either. In fact, Antfrost at least was actually the furthest you could get from being a human, Wilbur was fairly certain. The best way he could think to describe it was that Antfrost was a human-sized cat walking on two legs, while Seapeekay looked more human-like—save for the fox ears sticking out of his ears and the orange tail that was swishing behind him. They both wore coats that fell to their hips, decorated with swirling shades of copper against black fabric.

All of the Council lined up in a row in front of Philza’s throne, bowing with surprising coordination. Wilbur wondered if they rehearsed that, and judging by the relieved look on Antfrost’s face after they straightened back up, he was pretty sure it was.

“Sam, Ponk, Bad, Skeppy, Antfrost—it’s good to see all of you again,” Philza said, nodding to each of the Council. Then, his gaze fell on the fox man. “Councillor Seapeekay, I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

“Seapeekay is a new member of the Council,” Sam explained, gesturing to him.

Seapeekay seemed startled at being directly addressed, but quickly bowed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Emperor Philza and Emperor Technoblade. I look forward to working with you both.”

He didn’t say Your Majesty, and that made both Wilbur and Tommy raise their eyebrows. But none of the other Council members blinked twice, and Philza didn’t seem all that bothered by the omission of proper title either.

“I look forward to working with you as well,” Philza said, dipping his head in respect. “Ponk, is the arm new?”

Ponk glanced down at their metal arm, their brows furrowing before their gaze flitted back up to Philza. “Yes, it’s new. There was an… accident, back on Decima,” they answered after a beat, and Wilbur noticed how beside them, Sam seemed to shrink in on himself.

Interesting.

For the first time since the introductions began, Technoblade spoke up. “Is that Sam’s craftsmanship?”

This made Sam flinch, while Ponk refused to look in his direction. “You could say that.”

An icy silence fell over the group. Tommy shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, and Wilbur elbowed him in the side to get him to stop.

After a few beats, Puffy cleared her throat again, and the Council took that as their cue to move and stand beside the others. Then, she repositioned herself back in the doorway, and gestured for the last of the leaders to enter.

A single man staggered his way inside the throne room. He was an ogee, with large horns curling out of dark brown hair and above his ears. His steps were uneven, and there were deep bags under his eyes, as if he hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in weeks. Along with that, he was the most heavily-clothed out of everyone, wearing several layers of thick wool fabric, along with a black cloak that nearly brushed the floor, and a puff of brown animal fur around the collar. Chains also rattled with every step he took, and Wilbur could see steel and silver jewelry dripping off of both his cloak and his hands.

“May I present: President J. Texas Schlatt of Mantle,” Puffy introduced, her politeness sounding far more forced this time around than it had been for any of the other leaders.

Immediately, Wilbur knew he didn’t like Schlatt. His bow was sloppy, and he was breathing like he’d just run across the entire palace. It was probably the weight of all his clothes and jewelry. Even a single step in that getup had to be like lifting weights.

“Your Majesty, Your Imperial Highness, I must say you’re both looking pretty damn great,” Schlatt greeted, giving both Philza and Technoblade a sly grin.

Philza didn’t smile back. “Schlatt. Seems you won the re-election.”

“Sure did. What, you surprised?” Schlatt asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“A little bit considering you were dealing with those protests a few months back,” Technoblade drawled, giving Schlatt a flat stare.

Schlatt snorted. “Those? Nah, those weren’t a big deal. Sometimes when you do what you gotta do, it makes some waves, y’know?”

“I suppose so,” Philza acquiesced, leaning back in his seat. “Either way, congratulations on winning.”

“Thanks, glad to be back,” Schlatt replied, grinning as he waltzed over to join the others.

With that, Puffy stepped further into the throne room, and the doors slid shut behind her. Wilbur presumed this meant that Schlatt was the last of the leaders to arrive, and if that was the case, then the meetings would begin very soon.

Once the doors had shut, Philza shifted so he was standing up. His wings stretched out behind him like living shadows, his icy gaze skimming over the leaders gathered in front of his throne, the barest hint of a smile playing at the corners of his lips.

“I’m very grateful you all were able to make it here on such short notice. As we’ve said over our calls, we are living in a very tumultuous period, and there is quite a bit for us to go over. But before we dive into our discussions, I have two introductions to make of my own.”

Wilbur’s heart leapt into his throat when Philza turned to look at both him and Tommy. He held out a clawed hand, gesturing for the two to walk to the front of the throne room. Tommy gave him a nervous glance, but Wilbur nodded, encouraging him to go first.

Straightening his shoulders, Tommy walked to the front of the room, with Wilbur trailing close behind. He felt the eyes of the other leaders lingering on him, skimming over both their faces, searching their expressions for any clues to their thoughts. Wilbur did his best to keep his face neutral, while Tommy attempted to do the same.

“Boys, would you care to introduce yourselves?” Philza asked, giving them both pointed looks.

This time, Tommy didn’t need to be reminded that he had to go first.

“My name is Theseus Thomas Ióni, Crown Prince of Eldingvegr,” he introduced, bowing to the group.

Then, the eyes shifted to Wilbur, and he could already feel the questions lingering in their stares. “I’m Orpheus Wilbur Sóti, Prince of Eldingvegr.”

When he straightened up from his own bow, he could see Tina furrowing her brows as she glanced between the two of them, with Michael doing the same. Meanwhile, the Council of the Badlands were giving them varying looks of sympathy, while Schlatt was smirking like Philza had when he asked Wilbur if he was a bastard. Lastly, Karl wasn't even looking at the two of them, and instead was staring with wide eyes at the wall once again.

"The princes have requested asylum from the Antarctic Empire, so they have been staying here for the past week. They'll both be joining us for many of our discussions, especially regarding the situation on Eldingvegr."

"Shouldn't it just be the heir that joins us?" Schlatt asked, dark eyes focused on Tommy. "Don't see why the other one's gotta be there."

Wilbur fought the urge to curl his hand into a fist. "I am my brother's advisor, so I'll be in attendance at any and all discussions he is a part of," he explained, his voice tight.

"You say advisor, I say babysitter," Schlatt muttered under his breath.

To his left, Michael shot Schlatt a dirty look. "Don't be a dick."

Tommy's face twisted into a scowl and he opened his mouth to respond, but Wilbur elbowed him sharply in the side before he could say anything. When Tommy glanced at him, Wilbur shook his head. They couldn't afford to let Tommy's temper get the better of him so early into their first time talking to the other leaders.

Although Tommy clearly wanted to argue, after a few beats, his shoulders slumped in defeat. Still, he kept shooting daggers at Schlatt with his eyes, and Wilbur was just glad Schlatt seemed too stupid to notice it.

"Alright, now that we got the formal stuff out of the way, we should probably get the business stuff started," Technoblade cut in before Schlatt could make any more rude remarks.

Philza nodded. "Agreed. Let's make our way over to the negotiations room."

At this, Puffy opened the doors to the throne room once more. They all filed out behind her, Wilbur and Tommy being some of the last to leave, with only Philza and Technoblade following them.

As they all moved as a group down the hall towards the negotiations room, Wilbur kept his arm tightly looped with Tommy's. Neither one said anything, but they were both stiff as could be, and Wilbur could practically feel the anxiety bouncing off of Tommy.

The other leaders began to make their way into the negotiations room. Before Wilbur and Tommy could step inside though, two large hands settled on each of their shoulders.

"Try to ignore Schlatt if you can. Nearly everyone here hates the guy," Technoblade whispered to both him and Tommy.

Then suddenly, Philza was on Wilbur's other side, not touching his shoulder but leaning close to his ear all the same. "It's true. He's a fucking prick," he agreed, rolling his eyes. "Also,

you're gonna be really confused by pretty much anything Karl says. Just go with it. None of us ever know what the fuck he's talking about."

"Guess that comes with the territory of bein' able to see the future," Technoblade huffed, before dropping his hands from both their shoulders and stepping away from them. Philza did the same, gesturing at the door for the brothers to go first.

Wilbur was reeling over the fact that Philza and Technoblade both had just... casually given them advice. No games. No power plays. Of course, this could be an attempt at tricking them again, but it seemed too simple for that.

No, for some reason Wilbur got the sense this wasn't part of their games. The two men simply wanted to share a bit of advice with them and nothing more.

With his thoughts spinning wildly in his head, Wilbur made his way inside the negotiations room with Tommy looking just as bewildered as Wilbur felt. The others had already taken their seats, leaving only four chairs on one side of the table open. Wilbur and Tommy sat down, with Tommy sitting between Wilbur and Sam, while Wilbur was settled next to the two open seats he was certain Philza and Technoblade were going to take.

Sure enough, a few moments later, the men sat down in the last two chairs. And of course, Technoblade sat beside Michael, while Philza sat right next to Wilbur.

To say it was strange to sit right beside the Emperor he'd only either sat *across* from or seen on a throne was an understatement. It felt wrong to nearly be shoulder to shoulder with the man who had outright threatened him and Tommy several times at this point. His wings were stretched out behind him, with one of the wings extending far past Wilbur's chair and even going past Tommy's.

He didn't like it. The wings behind him kept rustling with every small movement, and it made Wilbur feel like he was being trapped. Even though he didn't feel a single feather brush his back or shoulders, the phantom sensation was there, as if Philza was wrapping his wings around both him and Tommy to declare to the others that they were under *his* control.

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur straightened up in his seat and pointedly tried not to look in Philza's direction. Beneath the table, he squeezed Tommy's hand, and breathed a small sigh of relief when Tommy squeezed back.

"Alright, I'm sure you're all quite tired from your journeys here, so today's meeting won't take up too much of your time," Philza began, folding his hands in front of him. "I figured it would make the most sense for Prince Orpheus and Prince Theseus here to go over the events of what occurred on Eldingvegr, so that we might be better equipped to discuss our next courses of action over the following days."

Immediately, Tommy stiffened as Wilbur tried to hide a wince. Philza had told them that they would want to know what happened on Eldingvegr. This was something he had been expecting. Still, that didn't make it any easier to talk about.

Once again, the rule of Tommy needing to be the one to speak first was ingrained into Wilbur's head. He stayed silent as Tommy took a shaky breath, clearly trying to figure out how best to word the nightmarish events of those few days.

"I'll try to, uh, not get too ramblly with this," Tommy began, blinking fast as he struggled to focus his gaze on one person.

"Take your time, and just explain it as best you can," Sam then said in a surprisingly gentle voice.

Tommy nodded, closing his eyes as he took another breath. His grip on Wilbur's hand was painful, but Wilbur didn't make a single move to pull away.

"To put it bluntly, we were betrayed," Tommy told the group, keeping his eyes fixed on the center of the table. "Eret—the King Regent who was supposed to rule until I turned eighteen—decided they actually didn't want to hand the throne over. They wanted to stay as the head of Eldingvegr, so they made a deal with Emperor Dream without mine or my brother's knowledge."

"A deal?" Tina questioned, frowning at them both.

"Yes, a deal to make Eldingvegr part of the Essempi Empire. And in turn, Dream would keep them as the permanent King," Tommy explained, lifting his head up just a bit. "Originally, they were just told that Dream was going to exile us from the planet, but once the invasion actually began Dream decided he wanted to execute both me and Wi- Orpheus instead."

"He wanted to execute *children*?" Bad asked, sounding incredulous.

"Are you really that surprised, Bad?" Antfrost said, his ears twitching. "It's Dream. He's done way worse than just executing kids."

"Yeah, like ruin the environments of entire planets," Tina muttered bitterly, picking at her nails.

"Wait, sorry to interrupt," Michael jumped in, straightening up in his seat. "I don't mean to, like, question you guys since this obviously was a really fucked up thing that happened, but how do you even know this? You said that Eret originally thought Dream was going to just exile you—how did you find that out?"

The question hung in the air, Tommy shrinking back in his seat as he no doubt flashed back to the crawlspace. Wilbur's own heartbeat picked up thinking back to it, remembering the way Eret and Dream's voices echoed off the thin walls, how Tommy was desperately clutching the back of his shirt and struggling to muffle the sound of his breathing.

Wilbur glanced at Tommy. He knew his little brother well enough that he could tell Tommy didn't want to answer this. Didn't want to have to detail the crawlspace or the running or any of it.

But the others wanted answers. It was a valid question to ask after all.

“If I may answer this for my brother,” Wilbur said after several long moments of silence, taking a deep breath to try and calm his pounding heart. “When the invasion began, we found a place to hide to avoid Dream’s soldiers. It was a small crawlspace behind a wall we used to play in as children, so we hid ourselves in there. Dream and Eret had a conversation in the room right outside the crawlspace, where they discussed the details of their plans, including Dream revealing his plan to execute us both. The wall was, uh, thin enough to overhear them both.”

A heavy silence smothered the table after Wilbur finished speaking. Sam, Bad, Skeppy, Seapeekay, Ponk, and Antfrost were staring at the two of them with blatant horror. Schlatt could’ve fallen asleep in his chair for all Wilbur knew. Tina and Michael both seemed troubled at this, while Karl was nodding solemnly—as if he’d already known the story before Wilbur told it.

“How did you escape?” Ponk asked, their voice low.

Tommy pushed up in his chair again at this. “We had to wait for the winds to die down again, which they did after about three days of us staying in the crawlspace. Then we pretty much just ran to the hangar, stole a shuttle, and flew to Zephyrs IV.”

“Three days,” Technoblade murmured, staring at his hands with a deep frown.

It was then Wilbur realized that he and Tommy had never told Philza and Technoblade the details of their escape. They’d given them both an overview, but the specifics of how things happened never came up.

To his right, Philza’s expression was unreadable. There was a crease between his brows, but he didn’t seem upset like Sam or Bad clearly were. Instead, he was again giving Wilbur that look like he was some kind of puzzle for him to figure out. As if he was trying to unspool Wilbur’s thoughts just by staring intently at him.

“You mentioned something about winds,” Tina suddenly cut in, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts. “What do you mean that you had to wait for the winds to die down before you could escape?”

Oh, right. There wasn’t much reason for outsiders to learn about Eldingvegr’s unique planetary conditions unless they were visiting it themselves.

“Eldingvegr as a planet is tidally-locked,” Wilbur began, forgetting that he technically had to wait for Tommy to grant him permission to speak. “It doesn’t spin like most planets do. One side of it always faces our sun, while the other is always in the darkness. Because of this, there’s a sharp difference in temperature between the two sides of the planet, which results in strong winds on the surface. During one month of the year though, Eldingvegr orbits closer to our sun than it usually does, and so the temperature on Sólsid—the light side—is even hotter than usual. The temperature difference becomes more drastic, so the resulting winds are far more dangerous than they usually are. While the winds are blowing, no ships can enter or leave the atmosphere or else they’ll be torn apart. But sometimes, the winds can die down completely for a few hours or so, thus we were able to use one of those windows to make our escape.”



“And I presume Dream also took advantage of one of these no wind periods to launch his invasion?” Sam asked, looking at Wilbur now.

Wilbur nodded. “Eret informed him when there was going to be a no wind period, so he was able to get his ships safely in the atmosphere and land right before the winds picked up again.”

“Which also lowered the risk of anyone escaping,” Technoblade huffed, seeming frustrated. “It’s smart. I’ll give him that.”

“And fucking barbaric,” Tina cursed, scowling deeply. “He didn’t even give Eldingvegr a fighting chance.”

“Dream plays dirty. This isn’t a secret to anyone,” Philza said, his wings ruffling again.

“That’s true, but I’ll admit, I still wouldn’t have expected him to make a move this bold,” Sam cut in. “Did he really think that the rest of the galaxy would be perfectly fine with him taking over *Eldingvegr*? Of all planets?”

“The man’s an idiot,” Tina huffed.

“He’s a damn good strategist though,” Michael pointed out.

“Not in the long run. Here we are, already having a summit to discuss what we’re going to do about this. I’m sure dozens of other planets are doing the same thing right now,” Ponk said, fiddling with their metal fingers. “If his strategy was to try and find out how to piss off the entire galaxy at once, yeah, he’s done a great job of that. But I don’t get how he thought this could turn out well in the long term.”

Philza rolled his neck, wincing when it made a loud cracking sound. “He probably assumed that he could force anyone who disagreed with the move into submission through denying them access to blaziphane.”

“Wait, speaking of forcing someone into submission, has Themis spoken up about this yet?” Antfrost asked, and Wilbur almost jumped at the mention of the planet. “Like, I know they usually stay out of the rest of the galaxy’s business, but this *has* to be big enough to warrant some kind of reaction.”

Technoblade let out a measured breath through his nose. “You’d think that, but Themis hasn’t said a single thing about the takeover.”

Suddenly, Philza turned so he was facing Wilbur. “Prince Orpheus, you were being trained as an advisor for Prince Theseus. Were you aware of what Eldingvegr’s relationship with Themis was?”

Tommy’s nails dug into his palm, and it took all of Wilbur’s willpower not to wince. “Um, can you be more specific?”

Philza narrowed his eyes. “I presume Eldingvegr was selling blaziphane to Themis, is that correct?”

“Eldingvegr sells blaziphane to just about every planet in the galaxy-”

“I’m asking about Themis, Prince Orpheus,” Philza cut him off, his tone bordering on impatient.

Annoyance flared in Wilbur’s chest. “And if you’d let me finish speaking then I’d tell you that we sell blaziphane to every planet in the galaxy, including Themis.” His words were sharp. Far sharper than they should’ve been. But he was sick and tired of being cut off, and if Philza was going to ask him a question like that in front of all these other leaders, he should’ve at least had the damn courtesy to let him finish his sentence.

Philza, as always, didn’t seem bothered by his abrupt tone. Instead, he just nodded. “That’s what I figured. Are you aware of how much blaziphane you provided them with? Was it the same amount you’d send off to other planets of similar standing, or was it more?”

“It’s rather presumptuous of you to assume that I would freely give away information about my planet’s relationship with another planet like that,” Wilbur said, ignoring the way Tommy was tugging his hand under the table, clearly trying to get him to shut up. “Especially regarding a planet as powerful as Themis.”

It was petty. God, he was being so petty and he knew it. But it was so satisfying to watch frustration flicker across Philza’s face. It was only there for a moment before his cool, unbothered mask slipped back over his features, but Wilbur saw it.

But then, a different expression bloomed across Philza’s face. A realization dawned in his eyes, and something like dread curled around Wilbur’s lungs as that sharp smile returned.

“Themis and Eldingvegr have a close relationship then, huh?” He asked, victory dancing in his gaze.

Wilbur clenched his jaw. “I didn’t-”

“You wouldn’t have gotten so defensive if they were just another one of the many planets you sold blaziphane to,” Philza pointed out. Even though he wasn’t laughing, Wilbur could hear the way the mockery was wrapped around each of his words. “Not to mention, I didn’t ask about Eldingvegr’s relationship with Themis. I simply asked how much blaziphane you sold them.”

Shit. Fuck. Wilbur was an idiot. He’d let his pettiness get the better of him for just a moment, and he fucked up as a result.

“Phil, I don’t think we need to be pushing the boys for information on Eldingvegr’s political relations right now,” Sam jumped in, narrowing his eyes at Philza.

“I was simply asking-”

“They’re going to be serving pteet at dinner in about half an hour,” Karl suddenly chimed in, still staring off into space. “It smells so good.”

Everyone at the table exchanged confused glances, while Tina just sighed like she was used to this.

“Is this your way of telling me that you’re hungry?” Philza asked, raising an eyebrow at Karl.

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind going to get some food,” Antfrost muttered, wringing his hands in his lap.

“God, that’s the first good fucking idea someone’s had all day,” Schlatt said, apparently having woken up from his nap. “I’m way too jetlagged for all this shit right now.”

Looking like he was fighting against the urge to scowl at Schlatt, Philza instead tapped his claws against the table. “Alright, we can reconvene in the morning if you all are alright with that?”

There was a murmur of agreement around the table, and Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief. The others began to get out of their seats, and Wilbur had to take a moment to collect himself as Tommy disentangled their fingers.

Before Wilbur and Tommy could stand up though, there was blonde hair in the corner of his eye. A chill ran up Wilbur’s spine as Philza leaned next to his ear, whispering quietly enough that only Wilbur would be able to hear it.

“You can do better than that, Orpheus.”

And with that, Philza and Technoblade left the room as well.

## Chapter End Notes

this'll be brought up sooner but in case it wasn't obvious: karl is high on shrooms which is how he sees the future. look I thought it would be really funny

another thing I thought would be funny: J. Texas Schlatt. in case you aren't aware, in Dune (which again, this isn't an au of but it is inspired by), there's a character named Duncan Idaho even though it takes place in space like tens of thousands of years into the future. so because of that I thought to make Texas part of Schlatt's name just for shits and giggles so you're welcome

anyway hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! politics are really starting to ramp up which is a lot of fun for me to play around with. make sure to subscribe if you haven't since I don't really have an update schedule for this, so get an email every time I post a new chapter!

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

I have a playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)

please leave me a comment telling me what you thought! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# a clandestine meeting

## Chapter Summary

After the meeting, Wilbur's evening doesn't go as planned.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone! sorry it took a bit longer than usual to update this, I've been home with my mom for this past week so I've been spending a lot of my free time with her and haven't had as much time to write. but I finally got this done!!

as always ty guys so much for all the love and support, I can't believe we're almost at 50k hits already :D

I don't think there are any TWs for this chapter so hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dinner that evening was tense, to say the least.

The other leaders had settled themselves on one end of the dining table in the dining room, and while Wilbur knew it was probably in his and Tommy's best interests to sit with the rest of the them to try and establish more connections, he was already exhausted from their talk earlier and he was sure Tommy felt the same. Recounting their experience on Eldingvegr had already wrung them both out enough, but Wilbur couldn't get Philza's whispered words out of his mind.

*"You can do better than that, Orpheus."*

The words were taunting. A mockery of his slipup during the meeting. It was meant to get a rise out of him, but it was also calling him out on something he already knew. Wilbur could do better. Of course he fucking knew that. And it was humiliating to have Philza, the man—the *Emperor*—he was supposed to be negotiating with, point that out.

Not to mention, Wilbur didn't miss the way Philza had called him Orpheus. Not Prince Orpheus. Just Orpheus. Until now, Philza had never addressed him or Tommy without using their titles. But then, whispered in his ear, he dropped the title.

It was another power play. Another way for Philza to remind Wilbur that in this game of wits they were playing, *he* was the master. Not Wilbur.

Wilbur wanted to be furious at this blatant show of disrespect. But all he could feel was humiliation.

So he wasn't exactly up for more political games that evening after the meeting, and he was sure Tommy wasn't either. Wilbur didn't say anything as he settled himself at their usual spot next to Aimsey and Ranboo, and while Tommy gave him a curious look, he kept quiet as well.

One glance down the table and Wilbur saw that Karl was telling some exciting story to Tina and Michael, waving his hands around like he was using an invisible paint brush to cast streaks of color in the air that only he could see. Michael was nodding along, intently focusing on his words, while Tina seemed bored out of her mind, as if she'd heard whatever Karl was saying dozens of times before.

Meanwhile, the Badlands Council were all huddled together, leaning in close and whispering feverishly in between bites of their meal. Seapeekay was discussing something at length with Bad, while Skeppy and Ponk nodded along. Sam also was nodding, but Wilbur could tell something was distracting him. His dark eyes kept flickering around the room, and when his eyes met Wilbur's for the briefest of seconds, Wilbur stiffened and glanced away.

And lastly, Schlatt was already leaving the dining room. He had a plate stacked high with food in his hand, but didn't seem keen on eating in the presence of others, instead staggering away from the table with a tired-looking guard following behind him.

"Wilbur? You okay?"

It took Wilbur a moment to realize Aimsey was saying his name, and jumped in his seat when they lightly tapped his shoulder.

"Uh, sorry. I zoned out for a second. What did you say?"

"I asked how the meeting went?" Aimsey asked, the flowers on their cheeks curling towards the small lamp pointed at their face.

"Oh." Wilbur blinked. "It was fine."

Aimsey frowned. Their flowers dipped as if to match their expression. "You sure?"

"It was fucking annoying," Tommy cut in, and Wilbur silently thanked his little brother's ability to read him so well. "We basically just repeated the same shit we've said before, and then got questioned like they didn't believe us." Behind them, there was a loud curse as Schlatt tripped over his coat leaving the dining room, and Wilbur hid a smile behind his hand as Tommy huffed. "Not to mention, Schlatt's a fucking asshole," he muttered under his breath.

On the other side of Aimsey, Ranboo stifled a laugh. "You're not wrong. He's always been a bit, um, difficult to work with."

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "You've met him before?"

“Yeah, I’ve helped Techno out during meetings and stuff a few times before,” Ranboo explained, twisting his fingers together. “So I’ve met Schlatt, and most of the other leaders too.”

There was a pause as Wilbur and Tommy shared a look out of the corner of their eyes. Ranboo not only knew the leaders, but had seen them in meetings before. This... This could be useful.

Suddenly, Aimsey chimed in. “I’ve also met most of these guys, although I haven’t really been in a whole lot of meetings with them since I’m just an attaché.”

Holy shit. Okay, Wilbur was really glad he and Tommy decided to sit at their usual spots tonight.

“Oh really?” Wilbur asked, fighting to keep his tone casual. “What was it like? Working with the other leaders before?”

The minute he locked eyes with Aimsey, he knew that they knew exactly what he was doing. But before they could say anything, Ranboo started talking, and Tommy and him both straightened to attention.

“Well, like I said, Schlatt can be kind of, um, difficult,” Ranboo began, lowering his voice as he leaned closer to Wilbur and Tommy. “You wanna know why he acts like... well, that? It’s because he’s drunk. Nearly all the time. I didn’t realize it until one time we had a meeting last the entire day, and Schlatt usually carries a flask in his jacket, but I think he forgot it that time. He got more and more quiet as the day went on, saying less rude stuff and bringing up more, like, actually kind of relevant discussion points? Not to say he was really, uh, good at negotiating. But you could tell he was actually paying attention for once. It didn’t hit me till afterwards though when Techno told me that was the first time he’d ever seen Schlatt sober, and that was when I realized that, oh yeah, he hadn’t been sober at all till then.”

“How does he get anything done if he’s fucking pissed all the time?” Tommy asked, frowning at Ranboo.

“I don’t think he does,” Ranboo admitted, eyes wide.

“There’s a rumor going around that he rigged the elections on Mantle,” Aimsey added. “Every time there’s an election, we all think he’s gonna be voted out. But somehow he always wins.”

“How’s Mantle not gone to shit then?” Wilbur asked.

Aimsey shrugged. “Apparently the economy is thriving over there, but I heard the taxes are killer.”

Well, if he’d been running an entire planet drunk off his ass for years now and Mantle was still a financial superpower like Technoblade described it, maybe Schlatt wasn’t as much of an idiot as he seemed to be. Even if he was a drunkard, Wilbur wasn’t going to let his guard down around him. Anyone could play up a persona to make others underestimate them.

While Wilbur didn't necessarily think this was the case with Schlatt, he wasn't going to rule it out either.

"What about that, uh-" Tommy was cut off by Karl laughing loudly again, and he sighed and gestured towards the Seer, "the weird guy from Kinoko Kingdom? What's his deal?"

"Oh, Marquise Karl?" Ranboo questioned. "He's really nice!"

"He's also high all the time," Aimsey snorted.

Ranboo stifled another laugh. "Well, that too. But he's really nice even if he's a bit out of it sometimes. According to him and Princess Tina, as the Seer he has to maintain a 'level of awareness outside of himself' at all times, and the mushrooms from Kinoko help him do that."

Tommy blinked. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"I have no idea," Ranboo shrugged. "Kinoko is, like, all about spirituality stuff though. So Karl's role is taken pretty seriously. I know he seems pretty goofy, but he actually knows a lot. Which, I guess makes sense since he can see the future, but you forget that sometimes when he talks about, um, weirder stuff."

"Man, I feel bad for Tina though," Aimsey sighed, shifting their lamp so the other side of their cheek was getting equal light. "It's gotta be a bit tiring to spend so much time with someone who's got one foot in the present, and one foot in the future at all times."

"I know she acts tired sometimes, but she really does care about Karl. I asked her once about it, and she said that since Karl was identified as the next Seer when he was a little kid, the two of them have known each other since they were really young, and he's basically her oldest friend," Ranboo quickly said.

"Is she in line for the Kinoko throne?" Wilbur asked, glancing back at Tina and Karl.

Ranboo shook his head. "Nah, she's got a few older siblings ahead of her. Not to mention, even if she was in line to be Queen of Kinoko, it's not like she'd do much more than she's doing now as Princess. The monarchy there mostly just act as an advisory board that oversees the democratically-elected government, but don't actually have their hands in a lot of things."

"And then the Church provides spiritual guidance for the Prime Minister, right?" Aimsey asked, glancing at Ranboo.

"Pretty much," Ranboo nodded. "Really don't understand how they have a monarchy, a Church-state, and a republic all at the same time, but they've been doing it for a while now and it's worked out so far."

So Tina and Karl were closer than they seemed, and Tina really held no major political power outside of acting as a member of an advisory board. Shit. That meant if they ever wanted anything from Kinoko, it would probably be more reasonable to go after Karl, but Wilbur didn't have the slightest fucking clue how to even ask the guy how his day was going. Not to



mention, since Karl and Tina were childhood friends, whatever Wilbur said to Karl would likely get relayed to Tina anyway.

Okay, so Kinoko Kingdom was likely going to be more trouble than it was worth to spend their efforts on. It was good to know that now, long before they wasted time trying to work over the princess and the seer.

“What’s your take on the Badlands then, Ranboo?” Wilbur asked, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. “It must take a lot of work to run three planets under a single government.”

“Oh yeah, it does,” Ranboo said, nodding as his eyes darted over to the group still deep in their discussion. “The Badlands aren’t part of the Empire, they’re just allied with us, so that makes their relationship a bit different. When it comes to working among themselves, they’re very diplomacy-oriented and really good at coordinating with each other. But when it comes to outsiders, like the Antarctic Empire, they don’t bend that easily.” Pausing, Ranboo blinked a few times, before dropping his gaze to his plate. “They’re all really nice though. I haven’t met the new guy, but Bad is one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet just, like, ever. Skeppy, his life partner, is also pretty nice, but he also seems to stay out of the politics stuff for the most part. If you do manage to drag him into a discussion, he doesn’t mince words, so I think Bad does more of the diplomacy stuff for him.”

There was another pause as Michael let out a deep, barking laugh at something Karl said, and when Wilbur glanced over, he saw Tina was giggling now too.

“Antfrost is also pretty friendly, and he and Ponk both have really good heads on their shoulders.” At the mention of Ponk, Ranboo lowered his voice even more. “The last time Ponk was here though, they didn’t have a prosthetic arm. I have no idea what happened, but in the past, Ponk and Sam were practically inseparable. This visit though, I haven’t seen them make eye contact once.”

“I dunno if it’s just me, but I feel like Sam looks kind of... melancholy, almost?” Aimsey suggested, furrowing their brows. “I might be imagining things, but there’s something off about him.”

Pursing his lips, Ranboo nodded. “Yeah, I see what you mean. The Badlands don’t really have a leader, per se, but if you had to name one, most people would probably name either Bad or Sam. But if something’s up with Sam then things might be different this time around.”

“And Michael McChill? What’s up with that guy?” Tommy asked, jerking his chin in the direction of the dark-haired man.

Both Ranboo and Aimsey shared a look before shrugging in unison.

“Honestly? He keeps a lot of things to himself, so I’m not sure. Not like he’s untrustworthy or anything, but more like he knows Serenity isn’t exactly a huge claim for the Antarctic Empire outside of being an Outer Sector planet. He doesn’t have a lot of weight to throw around, so he tends not to throw a fuss about stuff unless it really pisses him off,” Ranboo explained, dropping his hands from his lap and turning back to his food. “I don’t really, uh,

know a ton about all this stuff though. This is just from what I've seen the past few times we've had conferences like this, so I'm not an expert or anything."

Wilbur frowned at Ranboo's sudden backtracking, eyeing him as he absently cut up his food without eating any of it. Dammit. Ranboo must've caught onto the fact that he was spilling a lot of information on the other planets to two people he probably shouldn't be that cavalier with. Because Wilbur didn't believe for a second that he didn't know full well what he was talking about. He was being trained as a military strategist by Technoblade. Ranboo definitely knew how to watch other people, especially since he seemed to be more of a wallflower-type.

Oh well. They'd still gotten quite a bit of valuable information about the other leaders from Ranboo already, which Wilbur fully intended to put to good use.

The rest of dinner passed by without much else of note. Aimsey changed the subject to the weather of all things, and despite how pointless the topic was given that they all resided far beneath the ice and weren't really affected by the weather on the surface, Ranboo eagerly jumped onto the new topic. Wilbur continued to watch the other leaders out of the corner of his eye as they finished their own meals, and waited until the last of the Badlands council members had left before he pushed his already empty plate away.

"You ready to go to bed, Tommy?" Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow at his brother.

Tommy, who looked like he was falling asleep in his chair, nodded. "Can you-"

"I'm not carrying you," Wilbur said before he could finish the question.

"You're a bitch," Tommy mumbled as he stood up, shaking his head to wake himself up. They both said their goodbyes to Aimsey and Ranboo, before waving Jack over from where he was waiting along the wall to escort the two of them back to their room.

They headed out into the main hallway, Jack standing just a tad straighter than he usually did, and not handing out as many sharp quips to either of them. Maybe he could tell they were too tired to banter, or maybe he was on his best behavior because of the presence of so many foreign powers in the palace. Either way, the walk back was quiet, and Wilbur was grateful for it.

Their footsteps echoed across the stone, bouncing off the walls in an almost melodic rhythm. Tommy was leaning heavily into Wilbur's side, his eyes completely closed as he trusted Wilbur to guide him blindly through the halls. They turned another corner, and ahead of them, Wilbur watched Jack pass by a small alcove in the wall without even glancing in its direction.

When Wilbur and Tommy passed by it though, he paused.

The alcove was actually a door—a normal swinging door instead of the automatic sliding ones. There had been a few normal doors in the palace that Wilbur had seen already, so that wasn't what drew his attention.

No, what drew his attention was that this one was cracked open. And he could hear voices inside.

The voices were far too soft for him to make out. But through the tiny sliver of light that escaped from the barely cracked door, Wilbur was able to make out two figures talking in hushed whispers. He caught a glimpse of curly white hair, and the glint of bright gold.

Puffy and Sam. His head was bowed low so he was face to face with her, and she was saying something to him with a very intense look on her face. Sam was nodding, most of his expression hidden by the mask that covered his mouth and nose. Frayed threads of their voices reached his ears, but he couldn't make out a single word they were saying. Just worried tones and hushed noises.

Wilbur only paused for a second to watch the two of them. When Sam began to lift his head as if he could feel the weight of Wilbur's stare, Wilbur yanked Tommy down the hall and away from the door, heart pounding in his ears.

"Why'd you stop?" Tommy asked softly, eyes still closed and words slurred with sleep.

"Nothing," Wilbur whispered back. "Thought I saw something, but it was a trick of the light."

Humming, Tommy nodded and leaned further into him. Glancing between Jack and Tommy, Wilbur wrapped an arm around his shoulders and tugged him close, a lump forming in his throat as he tried to think of what Sam and Puffy could've been talking about.

It didn't make sense. Why would a Councillor of the Badlands be having a private—and seemingly secret—conversation with the Captain of the Royal Guard? If he had been talking to another Badlands Council member or even someone like Tina or Michael, that would make sense to Wilbur. But Puffy? It was odd. She wasn't involved in the politics of the Empire. Her job was to protect the Emperor and the Imperator. At least, that's what Wilbur assumed her role was.

But... truth be told, Wilbur wasn't sure *what* exactly Puffy did all day. Given her title, he had assumed she spent her days supervising the Royal Guard, but what if there was more to it than that?

Wilbur thought back to the meeting in the negotiations room. He had been too startled by Philza and Technoblade whispering in his ear about Schlatt to notice, but Puffy had gone inside with them. She didn't take a seat at the table, but she had waited by the doors. Not outside the room though, *inside*. Where she could hear every word that was said. Now, that in itself wasn't that unusual. It made sense to have a few guards in a room with that many powerful figures, but it was still something to note.

Either way, Wilbur needed to pay more attention to her. But then again, he was already stretched so thin trying to keep note of nearly every important figure in the palace. If this was a game of chess, then it felt like Wilbur was only playing with half the pieces. There were too many possible enemies. Too many figures to keep track of.

It wasn't like there was anything he could do to change that for the time being though. So he just took a mental note of Puffy, and picked up the pace back to their room.

After exchanging quiet goodbyes with Jack, Wilbur practically carried Tommy into the room. He clung onto Wilbur like he was a giant plush toy, whining in protest when Wilbur tried to pry him off to get him settled into the bed.

In the end, Wilbur finally managed to wake Tommy up enough so he could change into his pajamas. Once they were both out of their formal clothes and settled under the blankets, Wilbur thought about bringing up what he saw between Sam and Puffy with Tommy. But considering how exhausted he was, he doubted Tommy would be able to process the possible implications of it tonight.

Wilbur could tell him in the morning. After all, he needed his rest too.

And that was that. Wilbur was exhausted, Tommy was fast asleep beside him, and all he needed to do now was sleep. Recharge his battery so he could be at the top of his game tomorrow.

Except... he couldn't sleep.

With the blankets drawn up under his chin, Wilbur stared at the ceiling of his room, willing himself to get tired. To his left, Tommy was snorting softly, the freckles on his cheeks glowing faint blue in the dim light of the room. The sound should've relaxed him. White noise that reassured him his little brother was here, they were both safe, and it was time for his body to surrender to sleep.

But his head wouldn't let him. Thoughts kept buzzing around in his mind like flies, repeating his same questions over and over again. Why had Sam and Puffy been talking? What was the meeting tomorrow going to be like? What did Philza have in store for their future discussions?

Squeezing his eyes shut, Wilbur tried his breathing exercises. He did them over and over again, willing the waves in his mind to stop crashing on the sandy shores. The seafoam fizzled as the questions spun and spun in the waves, and despite the fatigue clinging to him like a second skin, it wasn't pulling him under the water like it should have. He was floating at the top, being buffeted from side to side as he struggled to let go. To surrender to the darkness below.

After a few more minutes of this, Wilbur's eyes blinked open again. He wasn't going to sleep like this.

In the past, Wilbur probably would've called a servant to bring him a sleeping pill. But the idea of taking a sedative, of not being able to wake up in case Tommy needed him... it made his chest seize with panic. Eret had wanted them to take those sleeping pills, and if they had, they'd be dead.

There was no reason for him to think Philza would try to kill him or Tommy in his sleep. Especially not now with all the other foreign leaders here. It was illogical, but Wilbur

couldn't bring himself to tap the disc waiting on his nightstand. His hand wouldn't move, no matter how many times he told it too.

So a sleeping pill was out. That meant Wilbur would have to find another way to get his mind to shut off.

As quietly as possible, Wilbur climbed out of the bed, careful not to disturb Tommy. Once he was standing, he glanced back and saw Tommy's eyes were still closed, and his snoring was uninterrupted.

While Wilbur didn't like the idea of leaving Tommy alone while he slept, it wasn't as if he could just pace in the room without waking him up. Besides, it would only be a few minutes. Even if Wilbur couldn't get himself to take a sleeping pill, he wasn't that much of a nervous wreck that he couldn't leave his brother alone for ten minutes.

...right?

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur hurried out of the room before he could talk himself out of it. Choosing a random direction, he started walking down the dark and empty halls of the palace, the cold stone floor seeping through his socks and making a chill run down his spine.

There was something hollow ringing in his chest without Tommy pressed against his side. Since they'd arrived on Zephyr IV, Tommy had always been either right next to him, or within his line of sight. This was the first time they'd separated since leaving Eldingvegr, and it was startling how prominent the absence was to Wilbur.

Still, he wasn't going to get any sleep sitting in that room, so he forced himself to keep walking. At first, his direction was random. He wasn't trying to find anything. All he wanted was to walk until the buzzing in his head shut up. But without even thinking about it, Wilbur soon found himself near that room he'd seen Sam and Puffy talking in.

Before he could get to the door to see if they were still in there, he heard footsteps and immediately ducked into a corner. Pressing himself against the wall, Wilbur begged for the shadows to hide him as he watched the door to the room swing open. Light spilled across the stone floor, and Wilbur watched Sam step out, air softly whooshing in and out of his mask. His dark eyes flickered around the hall, and Wilbur winced when his gaze fell on him. But Sam didn't focus on him, and Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief when he realized he hadn't been spotted.

Wilbur watched as Sam shut the door behind him, turning down the hall back in the direction of the dining room. It didn't make sense for him to go there at this time of night. The food had likely already been cleared, and if Sam was hungry, he could just call for a servant to bring him a late night snack.

No, Sam had to be going somewhere. And if Wilbur's hunch was right, it was related to whatever he'd been discussing with Puffy earlier.

Wilbur was grateful he hadn't worn shoes as he followed Sam down the hall, keeping close to the wall where the shadows would cover him if he needed. The pale glow from the city lights

outside the palace stretched across the floor in long slits, and Wilbur winced every time he had to walk through a patch of light, making sure to stay as far from Sam as he could while still keeping him in his line of sight.

Sam seemed to know exactly where he was going, ducking down different hallways with practiced ease. When he'd been walking for only a few minutes, he stopped at another door to knock on it. Wilbur hung back, watching as Seapeekay stepped out. The two nodded, exchanging a few words Wilbur couldn't make out, before they continued walking in the same direction as before.

It was strange. Despite the unfamiliarity of Zephys IV's palace, something like déjà vu settled on Wilbur's shoulders as he quietly followed the two council members through the halls. For a moment, he wasn't sure why it felt like he'd done this before, and then the memory flashed behind his eyes.

*"Wil, c'mon, hurry up!" Niki whispered to him, hand outstretched from where she had pressed herself into an alcove.*

*Glancing up and down the hall, Wilbur took a breath before sprinting across the open space. Niki grabbed his hand and yanked him into the alcove, the two of them struggling to stifle their giggles as the approaching footsteps got louder.*

*"The blaziphane yield this month has been higher than our average for this time of year, so I'm wondering if we should make an effort to put aside the excess for future reserves-"*

*Wilbur could hear Eret talking to someone as they got closer to the hiding spot he and Niki had chosen. She tugged him further back against the wall, and they listened as Eret turned the corner right before passing by the alcove, their footsteps fading as they made their way into the meeting room.*

*"Press your ear to the wall," Niki instructed as the door clicked shut, cutting Eret's voice off.*

*Doing as she said, Wilbur pressed his ear to the wall. Faintly, he could just make out Eret's deep voice echoing on the other side. It was difficult to understand the words, but the more he focused, the clearer it got.*

*"Our reserves are already depleted enough after last windy season. I understand we could use it for profit, but it's better to start stockpiling now for the upcoming windy season given how production completely shuts down during that month."*

*"Your Highness, while we understand your reasoning, Queen Myrina has requested-"*

*Before the siren woman could finish her sentence, another voice that was much clearer than the others cut through.*

*"What are you two doing?"*

*Stiffening, Niki and Wilbur jumped back, finding themselves face to face with a frowning servant.*

*“We were, um, we were just... playing hide and seek?” Wilbur tried, giving the woman a sheepish smile.*

*“Aren’t you supposed to be in your studies, Orpheus?” The woman asked.*

*Wilbur paled. “I finished early!”*

*Before the woman could question this, Niki jumped in.*

*“Aren’t you supposed to call him Prince Orpheus?”*

*This seemed to be the wrong thing to say. The woman’s frown turned into a sharp scowl, and Wilbur shrunk back at the force of her glare on him.*

*“How would you know, siren?” The woman asked, shooting daggers at Niki with her gaze. “This isn’t your planet.”*

*Unlike Wilbur, Niki didn’t shrink back at the sharp anger lining the woman’s face. Instead, she squared her shoulders, and shot the woman the fiercest glare she could manage. “It’s Lady Nihachu to you, ma’am. And I don’t have to be from Eldingvegr to know that a servant is required to refer to the royalty by their title. It’s a sign of respect.”*

*“Royal titles are for actual royals. Not a bastard child,” the woman sneered.*

*Embarrassment, hot and shameful, crept onto his cheeks. Wilbur ducked his head to try and hide his expression, while Niki was squeezing his hand hard enough to hurt.*

*“Niki, let’s just go,” Wilbur muttered, trying to squeeze past the woman so he could escape back down the hall. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll head back to my lessons now.”*

*The woman seemed pleased as she straightened up. While he could tell Niki wanted to say more, he knew that if she did, it would just give the staff more reason to hate both of them. It was easier to just go along with what they said. Besides, it’s not like she was wrong. Wilbur only had his title out of formality, not any kind of blood tie to the throne. That was something he was never going to be allowed to forget.*

*As they headed down the hall and away from the meeting room, the woman called out one last thing.*

*“You’re only here because of the King Regent’s kindness. It’d do you good to remember how fortunate you are, Sóti.”*

*Hearing someone call him Sóti was like an electric shock running through his entire body. That woman said his Eldingvegr name with the same contempt, the same complete disappointment that Tommy’s father had always said it with. Like Wilbur was making a mistake just by breathing.*

*Niki squeezed his hand tighter. Glancing back at the woman, she opened her mouth, and Wilbur yanked on her arm before she could speak.*

*"You can't use your Voice on her!" He whispered, dragging her away before she could command the woman.*

*"But-"*

*"Niki, she's not worth it," Wilbur said, knowing how much trouble Niki could get in if she pulled something like that.*

*"It's not fair the way she spoke to you though!" Niki argued, speaking louder now that the woman was out of sight. "You're just as much of a prince as Tommy is!"*

*"I'm not though. Not by blood," Wilbur said, dropping her hand and pushing his hands through his hair.*

*Suddenly, there were fingers on his wrists, tugging his hands back down as Niki forced him to meet her eyes.*

*"That woman is an idiot. Tommy is your brother, and therefore you're just as much of a prince as he is. You deserve respect, Wilbur."*

*"It's complicated-"*

*"It doesn't matter. You can't let them walk all over you like that," Niki insisted, squeezing his wrists hard enough to bruise. "Even if they don't like you, you need to demand they treat you with the same courtesy they'd treat any other royal. Otherwise they'll never respect you."*

*"I don't know if I can do that," Wilbur admitted, his voice shaking.*

*"You can and you will," Niki told him, her silver eyes glowing. "I'll make sure of it."*

Fuck. Wilbur had forgotten about all the times he and Niki had run around the palace as kids, listening in on meetings they weren't supposed to. He could practically feel Niki's hands on his wrists, tugging him down twisting hallways, squeezing hard every time a servant got mad at the two of them.

He could practically hear her whispering in his ear, reminding him that he couldn't sit back and let others walk all over him. If he wanted respect, if he wanted to be treated like an equal, he had to act like he deserved it.

Right now, Wilbur was sneaking around a palace to listen in on things he wasn't supposed to hear, in a place where he was struggling to earn respect. If Niki was here, he wouldn't have to fight the urge to cower every time Philza looked his way. If Niki was here, he wouldn't be second-guessing himself every five seconds. If Niki was here-

Niki wasn't here.

She wasn't here because Wilbur had left her behind. And while Wilbur couldn't fix that, the least he could do was remember what she'd told him.



Clenching his jaw, he hurried down the hallway, determined not to lose sight of Sam and Seapeekay.

It wasn't long before they reached the negotiations room. Unlike before, the sliding door had been left open. Sam and Seapeekay walked into the room, and Wilbur hung back, ducking into a small alcove nearby. Then, he listened.

"Sam, Seapeekay," Philza greeted, sounding like he was smiling at the two council members. "Thank you for joining us at such a late hour. Are the other council members going to be joining us?"

"Bad said he might show up, but he's also tired from the trip, so I'm not sure," Sam explained.

"I can take a post outside the door," Puffy offered, and Wilbur jumped at the sound of her voice. "That way I can open it up for him if he arrives."

"I want you to hear what we discuss though, Captain," Philza said, sounding unsure. "How about we just leave the door open for the time being? If he doesn't arrive soon, we'll assume he fell asleep."

"Someone might overhear if you leave the doors open, Your Majesty," Puffy told him.

"Take a post outside then to make sure no one is eavesdropping. You'll still be able to hear our discussion, no?"

There was a pause, and Wilbur was extremely grateful he'd already tucked himself into the alcove, hidden from view of the main hallway.

"Alright, Your Majesty."

There was the sound of footsteps as Puffy presumably settled herself outside the door to the negotiations room. Wilbur pressed himself further into the wall, even though he knew Puffy wouldn't be able to see him from this angle.

"The hall is clear!" Puffy called out after a moment. Wilbur pressed a hand against his mouth so Puffy wouldn't hear his sigh of relief.

"Great. Do we have everyone here then?" Philza asked, clapping his hands together.

"Where are Antfrost, Skeppy, and Ponk?" Another person—Tina, Wilbur realized—asked.

"They all wanted to rest. We figured one representative from each planet would work fine, but if Bad wants to sleep, he knows we'll fill him in anyway," Seapeekay explained.

"Can someone please explain what all the cloak and dagger is about?" Schlatt's booming voice echoed down the hall. "My evening plans were to see if the Zephys IV vodka is really as good as everyone says it is. Not to deal with some clandestine meeting bullshit."

“You’ll have plenty of time to try the vodka later,” Technoblade told him, already sounding annoyed. “We wanted to talk to you guys about what’s going on with us and Eldingvegr right now.”

“Without Prince Theseus or Prince Orpheus around,” Michael pointed out, making Wilbur stiffen.

“Precisely,” Philza agreed. “As I’m sure you can imagine, our discussions have to remain somewhat censored around the two of them. We’ll be having other private meetings at more reasonable times while you’re all staying here, but I just wanted to get your initial opinions on where you think we should go with our negotiations.”

“You’re the Emperor. Don’t you already have that figured out?” Schlatt asked, sarcasm dripping from his words.

“I am your Emperor, correct, Schlatt. But we all know I’m not Dream. I don’t rush into decisions because I think it will give me status or power. I strategize, and preferably, I like to strategize with other prominent figures in my Empire,” Philza said, sounding as though he were clenching his teeth. “Or, in the Badlands case, we’ll need to agree on a strategy before any moves can be taken.”

“So you’re asking us what we think you should do, and then you’re gonna tell us what you wanna do, and we’ll go from there?” Michael questioned. There was a moment of silence and Wilbur imagined Philza was nodding, because then Michael continued with, “Well, if we’re putting it out there to start, I think you’re fucking crazy if you don’t take over Eldingvegr.”

“I gotta agree with McChill over here,” Schlatt chimed in. “I don’t get why you’re wasting time with those brats when Eldingvegr is literally right there for the taking.”

“In case you forgot, Dream currently has control of Eldingvegr,” Technoblade jumped in. “I wouldn’t call it an easy conquest.”

“Okay, well it’s not like the twelve year old is gonna know shit about how to take it from Dream. Either way, that’s solely on you guys,” Schlatt huffed.

“We’re aware of that,” Techno shot back, and Wilbur could imagine him clenching his fist.

“Prince Theseus is fifteen, right?” Karl suddenly asked, and Wilbur was surprised to learn that he was in the room as well.

“Twelve, fifteen, what’s the difference?” Schlatt laughed. “Again, he’s a stupid kid. We don’t need him to take over Eldingvegr, so I don’t get why you’re wasting your time with him and his nanny-brother.”

“Phil isn’t one to depose rulers when taking over a planet. You should know that, Schlatt,” Sam said in a tight voice.

“Well, fuckin’ obviously or else I wouldn’t be here. But it’s not like you’re gonna put the fifteen year old on the throne when you do take it over.” He paused then. “Wait, are you

planning on putting that brother of his on the throne then?”

Wilbur’s breath hitched in his throat.

“No, of course not,” Philza immediately said, and something heavy settled itself over Wilbur’s shoulders. “He has no blood ties to the throne whatsoever, and from what I can tell, it’s more than a sore subject for him. I have a feeling that the Eldingvegrians would be more pissed about Prince Orpheus on the throne than if I were to rule the planet myself.”

“What gave you that impression?” Tina asked. “From what I saw today, Prince Orpheus seems more than well-equipped to take over the throne.”

“Oh, he’s certainly well-trained,” Philza agreed, and Wilbur dug his nails into his palm. “He would absolutely do a better job than his brother, but I’m not going to put him on that throne. That I can assure you.”

“Then what *are* your plans for those kids?” Seapeekay questioned.

Another silence hung over the room. This time, Wilbur was sure it wasn’t because someone was nodding.

A beat passed. And then another.

Then,

“We’re still working that out, but I have a few things in mind,” Philza said, as if that wasn’t a blatant non-answer. “I want to work with them both on these negotiations because I’d rather stay on good terms with them both. It’ll make things easier in the long run.”

“Are you considering an alliance with Eldingvegr, like what we have?” Sam asked.

“Nah,” Technoblade cut in, “our alliance with the Badlands works because you all are totally fine at managing yourselves. Eldingvegr is way too big of a target to remain independent. Honestly, I’m surprised it’s even lasted this long.”

“Wait, can we backtrack to Phil ominously saying he ‘has things in mind’ for Prince Theseus and Prince Orpheus?” Tina interrupted, sounding annoyed.

“You said it before I could,” Seapeekay agreed. “Not to beat a dead horse here, but seeing those two kids scared shitless today and then having you say you have things in mind for them really isn’t inspiring a lot of confidence right now.”

“While you all have a say in how we move forward regarding Eldingvegr, when it comes to the princes, that’s not something I feel that I need to divulge,” Philza explained, making a shudder run down Wilbur’s spine.

All at once, several people began to talk over one another. Wilbur struggled to try and make out who was saying what, but was saved when Technoblade shouted above the others.

“Hey, HEY!” The arguing quieted down. “That’s better. One at a time please. Considerin’ this room is filled with some of the most powerful people in the galaxy, I’d assume you all know the concept of taking turns to speak. Unless we need to make a rule where you guys raise your hands and Phil can call on you like a teacher.”

Shit. Technoblade pulled no punches.

An ashamed silence fell over the room. A few seconds ticked by, Wilbur counting on his fingers from where he was slumped against the wall. Then,

“Fine,” Sam finally began, “I’ll start then. Phil, you know I respect you as a leader and our ally, but you do realize how unnerving you’re making this whole thing sound? You need to give us a little more than just saying you have plans for those two kids, or else I’m gonna start thinking we need to be worried for their safety!”

Suddenly, a high-pitched laugh echoed out of the room that made Wilbur flinch in surprise.

“Oh, Phil’s not gonna hurt them! Don’t worry about that,” Karl said, words almost honey-like as his voice slurred.

Someone sighed deeply, and Wilbur imagined it was either Philza or Technoblade.

“Thank you, Karl,” Philza told him. “I have no plans to harm those boys, Techno can attest. I’m just still thinking over the possibilities, so I can’t really share my plans because I haven’t decided on a course of action yet.”

“Can you at least try to give us an idea of what you’re thinking?” Michael asked.

There was a pause, and Wilbur could picture Philza tapping his talons against the table as he often did when he was thinking on something. “I suppose the best way to put it is that I see... potential, in those boys. Especially Prince Orpheus.”

*Especially Prince Orpheus.*

Philza saw potential in him. Not just Tommy. Him. *Wilbur.*

Despite the ice encasing each and every individual rib in his chest, warmth blossomed out from the very center of it all. Not a comforting warmth though. Something burning. Something to be feared.

“So you’re intending to use them,” Sam said, judgement lacing his tone.

“In a way.” Philza laughed, and it reminded Wilbur of glass shattering across the floor. “I’m not going to hurt them, but keep in mind, those brothers came here. To Zephyr IV. They are under *our* protection right now, mine and Techno’s. Our decision regarding Eldingvegr is separate from our negotiations with the princes, so you all focus on the former, and we’ll deal with the latter.”

“Phil-”

“I’m not going to let an opportunity like this slip through my fingers,” Philza emphasized, each word uttered like a needle creating a stitch—every sound intentional and sharp.

“Are you talking about Eldingvegr, or the princes?” Sam asked, his words equally as careful.

The silence that followed stretched out, suffocatingly heavy even from where Wilbur was sitting outside the room. He heard Puffy quietly take a deep breath, before the squeak of her boots told him she was walking back into the room.

“I don’t think Councillor Bad is going to be showing up,” Puffy told the group. “So I think we should probably go ahead and shut the doors.”

Sighing, Philza muttered a, “Yes, go ahead.”

Then, there was a soft *whoosh*, and the hallway went silent.

There were no more voices. No sound of footsteps. No secret words floating through the air.

Wilbur wasn’t sure how to feel. Because it was as if he’d learned so much, and absolutely nothing at the same time. The only real knowledge he got from this was that Philza and Technoblade wanted to bring Eldingvegr into the Empire, which Wilbur had already figured was the case anyway.

But now he also knew that Philza had plans for him and Tommy. Something he wouldn’t even tell the other leaders. And he saw potential in them both, but especially him. No one had ever told him he had potential for anything. It was strange to realize that someone was looking *at* him for once and not straight through him.

After waiting a few minutes to make sure the hallway was empty, Wilbur pushed to his feet, wincing at how stiff his muscles were after being bent for so long. He straightened his legs out and stepped out from the alcove, eager to get back to his room to check on Tommy.

Before he could even take one step though, there was a soft *whoosh*, followed by the sound of footsteps behind him.

“I’m telling you, the walls are glowing now! And there’s so many beautiful colors in the air-”

Whirling around, Wilbur’s heart dropped into his stomach when he found himself locking eyes with Karl.

Oh fuck. *Oh fuck fuck fuck*. Wilbur was standing right outside the negotiations room. It was the middle of the night, and there was absolutely no reason for him to be out there unless he was trying to eavesdrop. Shit. Fuck. The minute Philza heard about this he would know that Wilbur had been listening in on their discussion.

Before he could try to stammer out some kind of excuse, Karl smiled at him.

Wilbur waited. He waited for Karl to yell to the others that Wilbur was out there. Or to possibly yell for Puffy. But instead, Karl just smiled softly, lifting a hand to wave at him. Slowly, Wilbur waved back, his blood roaring in his ears.

“Karl? Come back in here, we’re still talking!” Tina called out from inside the room.

There was another beat. Then, Karl dropped his waving hand, and nodded once at Wilbur before turning back to the negotiations room. The door slid shut behind him, leaving Wilbur alone in the hallway once again.

Was Karl not going to say anything? Or... did Karl just think Wilbur was part of his ‘visions’?

That was certainly possible. If someone was on hallucinogens as often as Karl seemed to be, there probably came a point where they just stopped questioning the strange things they saw. It was entirely possible that Karl’s lack of a reaction was because he thought Wilbur wasn’t actually there, and even if he did think Wilbur was in the hallway, maybe Wilbur could just... pretend he wasn’t.

Despite the fear wrapping around his chest like a vice, ice lighting up his veins at the idea of Karl telling Philza that Wilbur had been eavesdropping, he knew his best option was to hope that Karl simply wrote Wilbur off as a hallucination. If Wilbur tried to approach him about this, Karl would know it was real, and Wilbur would be left scrambling to try and convince Karl not to tell anyone.

Right now, even if Karl *did* tell Philza he was out there, the others might write it off as a vision anyway. Because again, there was no reason for Wilbur to be out there at this time of night. Sam and Seapeekay hadn’t seen Wilbur following them, so to everyone in that room, he had no way of knowing there was a secret meeting going on without him.

And so, ignoring the icy hand clawing up his spine, Wilbur turned on his heel and practically ran down the hall back towards his room. He kept his footsteps light, but darted as quickly as he could between the shadows, silently pleading with every force in the universe that he didn’t have any more surprise run-ins.

Luck was on his side it seemed. Wilbur made it back to his room without any issue, and slid under the covers as gently as he could, careful not to wake Tommy who was right where Wilbur had left him.

Staring at his ceiling, Tommy’s soft snoring filled the room. And despite the fact that his thoughts were spinning even more out of control than they had before, now his exhaustion seemed to fully catch up with him. His limbs were heavy and his eyes slipped shut of their own accord, sleep practically clawing at him compared to how awake he’d been before.

The waves dragged him under, and the icy water embraced him as everything went dark, and he drifted off into sleep.

fun fact this chapter was literally supposed to be so different in my outline but as always things run way longer than I think they're going to so you get this instead. hehe philza has plans what will he do :)

ngl i don't have a ton of energy for end notes rn bc i'm currently sick and might've finally lost the dodgeball game with covid after nearly 2 and a half years so :// hoping I don't have it but I definitely feel pretty blegh. if i *am* sick, let's hope I can still muster up the energy to write lmao otherwise i'm gonna be very bored

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

there's a spotify playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)!

also I started another (smaller) multi chapter fic! very different vibes to this one, it's very much a coming of age indie film vibe. don't have an update schedule for that one or anything, but i like to think it's pretty cool so go check out [honey and tangerines](#)!

hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! please let me know what you thought down in the comments, as always I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day :D

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# a tongue can be just as sharp as a dagger

## Chapter Summary

The boys receive a summons from a very unexpected person.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone I am back! now, before we get started, there are a few things I wanna talk about regarding this story from here on out. so **DON'T IGNORE THIS PLEASE READ THIS**

I talked about this on my twitter already, but for those who don't follow my twitter, I'm going to be continuing my stories the same as I always have. I took some time to consider if I wanted to keep writing this story as planned and not alter anything, especially regarding Techno's role in it, and after talking it over with friends I felt like it would be erasure to try and minimize his role or remove him from my stories in any way. to other authors: if that's all you feel comfortable doing, then of course do what's best for you. But for me, I feel like with the amount of time and effort Techno put into creating c!Techno as a character, it would be a disservice to just stop writing about him. So I'm not altering anything, I'm going to just keep going with stars as it's been planned.

now, for this chapter specifically, in a cruel twist of irony I had planned this chapter out about 2 days before that video was posted on Techno's channel. The first half of the chapter features stars!Techno more than he's been featured in the entire fic so far, and while I debated changing my plan so this wasn't the first thing I posted right after everything, I decided to keep it because it would be a disservice to the overarching narrative to change it. Basically, I really needed the scene to happen. If it's too soon for you, I completely understand. There's my moon and stars spacer after the scene ends, so you can scroll down to that and just skip to the next part if you don't feel ready to read a Techno-centric scene like that. I'll provide a summary of that first half in the end authors notes of this chapter.

I hope you all have been taking care of yourselves. We're grieving as a community right now, and I know some of you are finding comfort in fics right now, so I hope this can provide you with either a distraction or some comfort you need. Remember to drink water and be kind to yourselves <3

now, onto the chapter!



The next two days passed by in a blur.

The morning after he eavesdropped on that meeting, Wilbur gave Tommy a rundown of what he'd learned. Again, he didn't learn anything major, but he was able to confirm that Philza wanted to bring Eldingvegr into the Empire, and that he had special plans for both Wilbur and Tommy.

Tommy didn't seem as concerned about that as Wilbur was. Whether that was because he wasn't registering how unusual that was or that he just didn't want to think about it, Wilbur wasn't sure. Either way, he didn't push it with Tommy, because it wasn't like it changed anything in the long run.

What Wilbur *didn't* tell Tommy was how Philza had mentioned the potential he saw in Wilbur specifically. He wasn't sure why, it wasn't as if he didn't want Tommy to know that Philza was keeping a closer eye on him for some unknown reason, he just... didn't mention it.

There was another meeting with the leaders the following day (one that Wilbur and Tommy were actually invited to), and it wasn't any more productive than the first one had been. It was less formal than the first meeting, with a few representatives from Floslium also being in the meeting this time. Even so, the representatives from Floslium didn't say much, seemingly content to allow the others to guide most of the discussion.

Wilbur and Tommy didn't have much to say either. It wasn't because they didn't want to speak up, but there just wasn't much talk directly about Eldingvegr going on. For the most part, it was a meeting where the leaders discussed their agreements with the Empire regarding trade and how it had been changed in the past few days due to the events on Eldingvegr—a conversation Wilbur didn't even think he and Tommy needed to be around for. Still, he forced himself to pay attention, just on the off chance they gained any valuable insight as to how the Empire worked.

It was pointless in the end though. After the meeting ended, Wilbur dragged Tommy back to the library, and spent the rest of the day devising a list of texts for Tommy to read to continue his studies. It felt a bit like busywork, but it wasn't like there was anything else they could do.

Regardless, it was frustrating that even when they were invited to participate in a meeting, there was still nothing Wilbur could do to actually change anything. It was like he and Tommy were just there as decoration. So the leaders could say, 'look, we invited the princes this time so they're totally a part of this' just for props rather than them actually having any proper input.

The following day after that, they weren't called in for another meeting. He was sure the leaders were gathered again, but Jack relayed a message to them from Philza that it was going to be more Empire-specific negotiations rather than anything related directly to Eldingvegr, so there wasn't much point in them being present. Yeah, sure. Wilbur was certain it was just another excuse for them to hold a secret meeting like the one two nights earlier.

Since they weren't going to be in attendance at the meeting, Wilbur *had* planned to go to the library once again for lack of any other ways to spend their time. But before they could leave their room, Jack was knocking on the door once again, delivering the message of a summons.

"I'm supposed to take you two to the gym," Jack explained, arms folded over his chest.

Tommy frowned. "Since when does this place have a gym?"

"We've always had one," Jack shrugged. "Technically it's the training room, but it's a fuckin' gym. We got, like, training equipment in there."

"Why are we being summoned to a training room?" Wilbur questioned, furrowing his brows.

"You think they tell me shit?"

No, Wilbur doubted there was a lot of reason to tell a low level guard like Jack Manifold why the two princes were being taken to a training room.

Despite how strange the entire concept was, it wasn't like they could just say no. So after pulling on their shoes, the two boys left their room, following Jack down the twisting hallways of the palace.

To Wilbur's surprise, Jack led them past the dining room and into a wing of the palace they'd never been in before. It was past the throne room and the negotiations room as well, and at one point Jack even had to relay his orders to several guards so they could unlock a large set of black sliding doors.

"What part of the palace is this?" Wilbur asked as the doors slid shut behind them, revealing the same unmarked walls and stone pillars that decorated most of the halls.

"This is the Emperor and the Imperator's personal wing," Jack told them, straightening his shoulders just a tad at the words.

Immediately, Wilbur stiffened. "Why are we in their personal wing?"

Jack rolled his eyes, as if Wilbur had asked an obscenely stupid question. "Because that's where the two of them train? Duh?"

Wilbur glanced at Tommy, who was giving him a wide-eyed stare. The lines of confusion were just as clear on his face as they were in Wilbur's mind, both of them practically screaming the same question in their heads. Why the fuck were they being summoned to Philza and Technoblade's *personal* training room?

They passed by many closed doors with scanners on the front, looking as though they required either a keycard or some kind of fingerprint to open. Wilbur eyed one particularly plain-looking door with an extremely heavy scanner mounted beside it. Was that an office of some kind? The Emperor's personal office?

Finally, after what felt like ages of walking, Jack stopped in front of a towering set of double doors. He nodded at the single guard standing in front of it, relaying his orders and gesturing

to Wilbur and Tommy. The guard narrowed her eyes, scanning over both of them, before she turned and tapped the scanner to turn it green.

The doors slid open with a soft hiss. Jack gestured for them to go in, and Wilbur knew he was probably going to be stuck waiting outside until they were done. Resting a hand on Tommy's shoulder, Wilbur shared one last look with Jack before the two of them hurried through.

The training room was... much grander than Wilbur expected it to be.

High-arched ceilings dominated the space, with sharp angles and sleek surfaces reminding Wilbur of the throne room. A massive floor to ceiling window dominated an entire wall, overlooking the city from a side Wilbur hadn't seen before, showing off more of that glittering horizon. In the room itself, Wilbur noticed a few black mats had been spread across the floor, and there was a long table covered in various weaponry.

Some of the weapons were basic—small daggers and longer spears decorated with ornate gems and sharpened to a deadly point. But there were more complex weapons as well, like curved swords and a few holo-discs that Wilbur recognized as ones that manifested force field shields.

As soon as he spotted the weapons, Tommy gasped in delight, running over before Wilbur could even try to stop him. He picked up a thin, short dagger made of a glimmering black metal. The handle was silver, and twisted into intricate swirls to create a rather gorgeous hilt inlaid with blue jewels. Tommy was grinning from ear to ear as he carefully ran his fingers over the edge of the blade, but nearly dropped it when a booming voice called out.

"Don't cut your finger off with that."

Whirling around, Wilbur stiffened when he saw Technoblade standing at the other end of the room, having shed the long coat he usually wore in favor of just wearing trousers and a tunic. His hair was tied back in a high ponytail today, but Wilbur could still see the deftly-woven braids still tied into it as well. He was watching them both with a bored gaze, one eyebrow raised as if he was just waiting for Tommy to break something.

"So you're the one who summoned us," Wilbur said, taking the dagger out of Tommy's hands and setting it back on the table. Tommy frowned at him, but didn't try to pick it up again as he turned his own focus onto Technoblade as well.

"I did," Technoblade confirmed, taking a few steps forward so he was in the center of the room.

"Aren't you supposed to be in that meeting with the Emperor?" Tommy asked, folding his arms over his chest.

Technoblade shook his head, walking forward more until he was right in front of the both of them. "Nah, I wanted a break from it for a bit and I wasn't super instrumental to what we're talking about today, so I left early," he explained, golden eyes darting between them both. "Usually when I don't have anything else to do, I spend my time training. Then I realized you two are probably bored out of your minds with nothing to do, and I need sparring partners

that aren't guards since Puffy keeps yelling at me when I take her guards off duty to train with them, so I figured you both would do."

Wilbur's eyes widened. "You- You want us to spar with you?"

"Yeah? Is that a problem?" Technoblade asked.

Tommy spoke before Wilbur could. "No! That's not a problem at all!" He exclaimed, practically bouncing on his toes. "Sparring sounds great. A-okay with us, no problem here!"

What was Tommy doing?

"I think it's a bit of a problem considering neither of us knows how to fight," Wilbur hissed, elbowing Tommy in the side.

At this, Technoblade blinked, clearly surprised. "You don't know how to fight?"

Tommy scoffed. "Maybe not formally, but I'm not fucking useless. Could knock anyone out with my fists if I wanted."

"When have you *ever* knocked someone out with a punch?" Wilbur questioned, turning to frown at Tommy. "Wait, when have you ever even punched someone before?"

"I've punched Tubbo!" Tommy declared proudly.

"That was literally an accident because you were trying to fake punch him as a joke and had shit aim," Wilbur reminded him. "You didn't knock him out cold either. I don't even think he bruised."

"He definitely had a bruise," Tommy argued.

"He did not."

"You fucking liar!"

"I'm not lying, you're the one who-"

"I'm already regretting my choices," Technoblade deadpanned, cutting off their bickering.

Wilbur flushed, having momentarily forgotten they were in the room with the Emperor of an entire empire. The man who very well could be their only chance at getting Eldingvegr back, considering he was the one in charge of the Empire's military.

"Um, my apologies, Your Imperial Highness. My brother and I got distracted," Wilbur apologized, eyes falling to the ground in faux deference. "But to answer your question, no, we haven't had any formal training with fighting."

Technoblade's pink brows scrunched together at this. "What are they even teachin' you two anyway if you don't know how to fight? What if someone tries to assassinate one of you?"

“That’s what I’m saying!” Tommy exclaimed. “I had to go and study fucking maths instead of learning how to, y’know, defend myself!”

“Given the number of guards we had in the palace, I don’t think they ever thought it was really necessary,” Wilbur explained.

It was mostly the truth. There were plenty of guards in the palace on Eldingvegr, so there wasn’t much of a safety concern. But one of the main reasons no one was ever that worried about there being any attempts on Tommy’s life in the palace was because they always had Niki with them. Niki, who could control someone like a puppet just with a few words. Although Niki’s purpose as emissary was to keep tabs on both him and Tommy on behalf of the sirens, there was also always the unsaid role she played as their unofficial bodyguard.

Technoblade didn’t need to know that part though.

“Well, you’re not on Eldingvegr anymore, so I think it’s time we changed that. It would really suck after all if our negotiations got ruined because some random assassin broke in,” Technoblade suddenly said, gesturing for the two of them to move away from the weapons table. Frowning, Wilbur and Tommy both stepped to the side, and watched as Technoblade picked up the dagger Tommy had been admiring.

“Is that a risk here?” Wilbur asked, struggling to keep his voice level. “I thought you said we were safe!”

“You are. But it never hurts to be prepared,” Technoblade said, meeting his eyes in a flat stare.

He set the dagger back down on the table, and picked up a small holo-disc beside it. When he tapped the top of it, his body was momentarily lit up in a shimmering blue light, before fading just as fast.

“Are you two familiar with training shields?” Technoblade asked.

“Oh yeah, we’ve used them a few times,” Tommy answered, already reaching for one on the table. He held it towards Technoblade with one eyebrow raised. “You want us both to turn ‘em on?”

“Yeah, do that.”

Tommy didn’t need to be told twice, and was immediately encased in that blue light for a brief moment before it faded to invisibility. Then, Technoblade and Tommy’s eyes both fell on Wilbur, who still hadn’t made a move towards the table.

“Prince Orpheus?” Technoblade pushed, walking onto the mat and starting to stretch.

“Your offer is appreciated, but we don’t need training,” Wilbur said quickly, wrapping his arms around himself.

“Wil, c’mon,” Tommy whined, slumping into his side. “What’s wrong? Why don’t you wanna learn some fighting moves?”

It wasn't that Wilbur's problem was with learning how to fight (well, it partially was because the idea of physically hurting someone made him sick to his stomach, but it wasn't his primary objection), it was more to do with who was offering to teach them. The Imperator of the Antarctic Empire. A man they were supposed to be on guard anytime they were around. Someone who was watching them, waiting to notice any weak spots. If they agreed to train with Technoblade, they were making themselves vulnerable in front of him. Admitting ignorance.

Wilbur didn't want to stoop down so low in front of someone they were in the middle of political negotiations with. And he couldn't believe how cavalier Tommy was being about the entire thing.

"Do you really want to show him how helpless we are right to his face?" Wilbur hissed into Tommy's ear, leaning down so Technoblade wouldn't be able to overhear.

Tommy scoffed. "Wil, even if we were trained, I'm pretty sure he could still kick our asses without even breaking a sweat. Look at him!"

"I'm not trying to say we need to make him think we could fight him because that's obviously not true. But we're admitting our weakness. Don't you get it?"

"Wasn't that what we wanted though? We wanna get sympathy and shit?" Tommy questioned.

Wilbur sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We're trying to get sympathy from the Badlands, not from the fucking Imperator!"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Well, I don't care. He already knows we can't fight, so I don't get what the fuss is about. I'm gonna try and learn something fucking useful, but if you wanna pout on the sidelines be my guest."

Then, before Wilbur could argue, Tommy was grabbing the dagger off the table and hurrying towards the mat. Wilbur watched him go, clenching his jaw as he debated the merits of just dragging his little brother away, but knew it was just going to cause more trouble than it was worth.

So after a few seconds of silence, he grabbed a holo-disc and turned on his own shield as well. Then, he moved closer to the table, searching for a weapon of his own to use. His eyes quickly caught on a dagger that looked as though it was made of a shimmering, white gemstone. The blade itself was curved and almost iridescent, rainbows catching in the dull lights above his head. The hilt was gold and had intricate swirls and leaves carved into it, and when Wilbur picked it up, he noticed it was heavy, but not too heavy in his hands.

"Once you've picked your weapon, come over here and I'll start going through the basics," Technoblade called out.

Biting back a sharp retort, Wilbur curled his fingers around the hilt of the dagger, and followed Tommy to the mat. Another reason he didn't want to train with Technoblade besides what he'd already told Tommy was that he didn't understand Technoblade's motivations for

this. Why would he care that the two of them didn't know how to fight? It's not like he actually cared for their safety. If they got killed by some random assassin, it would probably be better for the Antarctic Empire in the long run, because they could just take over Eldingvegr without any worry about negotiations from that point forward.

Wilbur didn't understand why Technoblade was doing this. And if he couldn't figure out someone's motivations, that was usually a red flag. Wilbur didn't trust Technoblade, just like he didn't trust Philza. But Tommy was completely oblivious to any ulterior motivations the Imperator could have, and it bothered Wilbur to see his little brother act so clueless. Tommy wasn't stupid. Wilbur knew he wasn't. And yet he was acting like this.

It was driving him a bit mad, to say the least.

Training began with Technoblade running through stances with them. He had conjured up some sleek dagger from his pocket, and was using it to act as a mirror for how Wilbur and Tommy should hold their own blades. Once they got their feet positions down, Technoblade began to demonstrate different lunges and swipes, and that was where Wilbur began to get frustrated.

Tommy was a natural at this. It was the only way Wilbur could explain how he looked so fluid, darting forward and back, blade curved in his hand like it was an extension of his own arm. He mimicked Technoblade like a mirror, a wide grin splitting his face the entire time he practiced.

Wilbur was decidedly not on the same level. His movements were stiff, and clunky. The blade felt unnatural in his hand, and he kept struggling not to drop it whenever he tried a lunge. Wilbur wasn't made for fighting. His weapons were his words, not his body. He could spend all day dancing in political conversations, but his mastery of the choreography ended the second he was handed a physical weapon.

Not even a full hour had passed before sweat was building up under Wilbur's coat. Tommy had tossed his overcoat to the side long ago, and was still mirroring Technoblade in plain trousers and a shirt, looking far too close to matching with the Imperator for Wilbur's liking.

Thankfully, before Wilbur could really start to go mad with the monotony of every parry and lunge, a new voice cut in.

"Hey Techno- oh."

Glancing behind him, Wilbur saw the doors to the training room open, and a familiar Enderian made his way inside. Ranboo faltered when he noticed Tommy and Wilbur in the room, his split-colored eyes blinking quickly as he glanced between the brothers and Technoblade.

"Uh, sorry, is this a bad time?" Ranboo stammered, wringing his hands in front of him. "It's just- This is when we usually train so I figured- I'm sorry if I'm interrupting but-"

"You're fine, Ranboo," Technoblade reassured him, straightening up from where he was demonstrating a stabbing blow on a training dummy. "I was just giving the princes a basic

rundown in self-defense.”

Ranboo nodded, taking a step backwards. “Oh, yeah, okay! Sorry, um, I’ll be on my way then. I don’t wanna bother you guys.”

“Nah, you’re staying,” Technoblade said, waving him closer. “I need your help actually. I’ll spar with Prince Theseus, and you can spar with Prince Orpheus.”

At this, Wilbur stiffened, nearly dropping his dagger onto the ground. “Why don’t I spar with you, and Theseus can spar with Ranboo?” Wilbur suggested.

Technoblade raised an eyebrow. “No offense, but if you wanna save yourself from total embarrassment, stick with Ranboo.”

Heat rushed to Wilbur’s cheeks. “Theseus has the same training I do,” he argued. “It’s more evenly matched this way anyway. Ranboo is closer to Theseus’ age.”

“Wil, it’s fine-”

“Tommy, let me handle this,” Wilbur snapped, shooting a glare at Tommy.

Clenching his jaw, Tommy narrowed his eyes, but didn’t say anything as silence fell over the training room. The weight of Technoblade’s stare was heavy on Wilbur’s shoulders, and he struggled not to squirm as the seconds ticked by.

Then,

“You don’t trust me to hold a knife to your younger brother’s throat,” Technoblade said, no hint of any emotion whatsoever in his voice.

Fighting to keep his face neutral, Wilbur lifted his chin and met the piglin’s golden eyes. “No, I don’t.”

Even though they were wearing training shields, they could only do so much. They were mostly for training after all, and with one really strong hit, they could break apart and be rendered completely useless. All it would take was one good swing from Technoblade, and Tommy could be dead.

Suddenly, things moved very fast.

One second, Technoblade was standing across the mat, closer to Tommy than he was to Wilbur. Then in the next, Wilbur’s head was slamming into the mat, and there was pressure on his chest as Technoblade was kneeling above him.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the training shield flickering around his body. Pain radiated through his skull, and his lungs fought to breathe with the pressure being put on them from the hand Technoblade was using to pin him down.

There was something cold against his throat. The flickering blue light got more noticeable as Technoblade held the blade only inches from his skin.



“If I wanted to kill either of you, you’d already be dead,” Technoblade told him, his voice scarily calm.

Wilbur’s heart pounded in his ears as he met those bright gold eyes, and knew full well that Technoblade was telling the truth.

After a few beats of silence, Technoblade let go. He got back to his feet, and offered Wilbur a hand up. Before he could even register the hand though, Tommy was shoving past Technoblade, falling to his knees beside Wilbur and scrambling to put himself in between him and the Emperor.

“Don’t you dare lay a hand on my brother like that again,” Tommy snarled, and it was then Wilbur realized Tommy was trying to shield him from Technoblade with his own body.

Technoblade didn’t seem bothered by the aggression. “I was just trying to make a point.”

“Yeah, well point made. Now step the fuck back,” Tommy ordered, glaring at Technoblade with a kind of wrath flashing in his eyes that Wilbur hadn’t seen before.

Although there was no way Technoblade was intimidated by Tommy, he did as he asked, gesturing for Ranboo to come join them on the mat. Ranboo seemed like he had no idea what he was doing there, and awkwardly shuffled over while Tommy helped pull Wilbur to his feet.

“Are you okay?” Tommy whispered to him, squeezing Wilbur’s hand.

“I’m fine,” Wilbur reassured him, his pounding heart already fading back to a normal level. “Just startled.”

“So can we continue training now?” Technoblade asked, drawing Tommy and Wilbur’s attention back to him. “You’re not hurt, right, Prince Orpheus?”

Wilbur shook his head. “I’m alright.”

Technoblade nodded. “If you want to stop, we can. I’m not trying to force you two to be here. But I do think you both need to learn how to defend yourselves at some point.”

On the one hand, Wilbur didn’t want to be here especially after *that*. It wasn’t necessarily the fact that Technoblade had threatened his life, because he really hadn’t. It was more so that Wilbur was humiliated. Having been reminded yet again how powerless he and Tommy truly were in this entire situation.

But as much as he hated to admit it, Technoblade had a point. They weren’t on Eldingvegr anymore, and it wouldn’t hurt for them to learn how to defend themselves. Especially considering how well Tommy seemed to take to it.

“We’ll stay,” Wilbur decided, bending down to pick up his dagger from where he’d dropped it. “If that’s alright with Theseus, of course.”

Tommy seemed surprised, but after a beat, nodded as well. “Yeah, we’ll keep going.”

“And... you can spar with him,” Wilbur relented, shoving down the hot shame rising up in his throat. “I’ll spar with Ranboo.”

It wasn’t admitting defeat, Wilbur told himself. He was proving to Technoblade that he wasn’t afraid of him by letting him spar with Tommy. Yeah, that’s what it was. He wasn’t afraid of Technoblade, and wanted to make sure he knew that.

“Sounds good to me,” Technoblade shrugged, readjusting the grip on his own dagger. “Ranboo, go get yourself a weapon and a training shield. Show him the first style I taught you.”

Nodding, Ranboo hurried over to the table, picking out a dark red dagger with a crystalline blade. Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur moved to a separate mat, watching from the corner of his eye as Technoblade and Tommy began to circle one another.

The tension from Wilbur and Technoblade’s... altercation faded quickly as they all became distracted by fighting. To Wilbur’s surprise, Tommy held up well against Technoblade—at least as well as he could, considering Tommy had zero training and Technoblade had years and years of it. As for his own progress against Ranboo, it was more than generous to say he was lacking. While Ranboo didn’t seem like much of a fighter, he was far better off than Wilbur, and he ended up flat on his back at least five times over the course of their sparring session.

At least Ranboo was nice about it. He apologized every time he hit Wilbur, and always helped him to his feet. He showed Wilbur how to shift his weight with every attack or dodge, and advised him on the best ways to use his lanky build to his advantage rather than relying on brute strength he didn’t have.

Near the end of the session though, while Wilbur was trying to figure out how to parry against Ranboo’s lunge, he was startled by an unexpected sound. He stumbled over his own two feet, nearly falling right into Ranboo’s dagger, but didn’t bother acknowledging his mistake as he whipped his head over to the mat Tommy and Technoblade were sparring on.

Tommy... Tommy was laughing. It was bright, loud laughter. The kind that had been a rarity since they’d escaped Eldingvegr. Somehow, both he and Technoblade had ended up on the floor, and Tommy was clutching his stomach as he cackled at the ceiling. Technoblade was laughing quietly as well, and Wilbur was taken back by the small smile that had quirked the corners of the Emperor’s lips.

Then, as if realizing what he was doing, Tommy cut himself off all at once. He snapped his mouth shut, eyes darting nervously over to meet Wilbur’s. They shared a silent look, before Tommy turned away from him, pushing to his feet and shaking himself off.

They went back to sparring without anyone saying a word about what just happened. But Wilbur couldn’t ignore the rock that had dropped into his gut at that.

For the rest of the session, Wilbur’s fighting was even worse than it had been before. At the very least though, Ranboo didn’t comment on it, and for that Wilbur was grateful.



Late that night, Wilbur found he couldn't sleep again.

Ranboo had walked with them to the dining room after their training session had ended, and they all ate dinner with Aimsey, chatting about mindless things for the sake of not eating in silence. It was both awkward and not, with the physical exhaustion weighing down both his and Tommy's bones making it impossible for tension to line their shoulders, but something off still settling in the air between them.

Aimsey could tell something was amiss, but didn't ask questions. Wilbur had a feeling Ranboo would tell them later, and he was glad for that because he really didn't want to try and explain what was wrong. Because technically, nothing should've been wrong. Except for the fact that what had happened was *weird*. It was weird for the Emperor to offer to train them. It was weird for him to care about their safety. And it was weird for Tommy to laugh with him as if they were old friends.

It was weird, but it had happened. Now Wilbur was left to try and make sense of it all.

After dinner, Tommy called the shower first, and passed out almost as soon as his wet hair hit the pillow. Wilbur was glad for that, because he didn't have the energy to try and talk with Tommy about the strangeness of it all right then. So instead he took his time with his own shower, letting the hot water soothe the aches in his muscles and the bruises littering his back and chest.

Despite the fact that his entire body felt as though it were made of jelly, by the time Wilbur was settled into bed next to Tommy, he found himself wide awake once more. The exhaustion that had been tugging at his eyes was gone, and anxiety was buzzing under his skin like an unwelcome friend.

This time, Wilbur didn't bother laying there for half an hour staring at the ceiling. Instead, he accepted his fate with surprising grace, and considered his options for a few moments before he was climbing out of the bed once more.

He wasn't as nervous leaving Tommy alone in their room this time like he'd been before. Of course it still felt wrong not to have his little brother at his side, but he was able to shove the anxiety down, because it was like Technoblade had said earlier that day. If he wanted either him or Tommy dead, they'd already be dead. Wilbur was sure the same thing applied to Philza.

His thick socks muffled his steps across the cool stone floor as he hurried to the library. It was dark in the palace at this time of night, with long shadows dancing along the walls and tricking Wilbur every few minutes into thinking there was something in the corner of his eye when there wasn't. The library itself also had all the lights turned off, but the faint light pouring in from the window outside was enough for Wilbur to walk by, and he made his way to one of the desks in the corner of the room, wincing at the brightness of the first holo-pad he picked up.

Pulling his knees up to his chest, Wilbur slumped against the cushions of the chair as he rested the holo-pad against his thighs. He scrolled through the texts on the holo-pad itself, blinking slowly until he spotted a title that piqued his interest.

It was a book on the native species of The Nether—the planet where piglins like Technoblade originated from. Wilbur didn't know much about piglins outside of that, so he figured it wasn't a bad subject to look into, especially if this whole training thing with Technoblade ended up becoming a regular fixture in their routine here.

Wilbur started to read. The library was quiet around him, wrapping him up in silent reassurances as the anxiety twisting inside of him began to smooth itself out. He read about a land of brimstone and hellfire, where the natives had adapted to live with intense heat and toxic fumes, clinging onto the few valuables they could find like gold and trees the color of blood.

He hadn't even gotten five pages in though when he heard the door to the library open.

"Oh, I didn't realize anyone would be in here at this time of night."

Fuck. Shit. Of fucking course of all people to find him here, it was none other than Emperor Philza himself. Wilbur's luck was really shit, now wasn't it.

"My apologies, I just- I couldn't sleep, so I was just reading-"

"You don't need to apologize. This library is free for anyone to use," Philza reassured him, lifting a hand to stop Wilbur from standing.

Due to the late hour, Philza wasn't wearing the refinery that Wilbur was used to seeing him in. Instead, he simply wore a long robe with slits cut into the back for his wings, and the circlet that usually rested on his head was gone. Even still, Wilbur could see the faint light glinting off his talons, and couldn't help but compare his pitch black wings to an endless void. It was difficult to make out any individual feathers in the gloom like this, and Wilbur disliked how it made Philza look even more intimidating than usual.

"Do you mind if I ask what you're reading?" Philza asked, making his way across the room and towards Wilbur's chair.

Wilbur fought the urge to shrink back in his seat. "I... I was reading up on the species of the Nether."

Philza hummed, stopping when he was right next to Wilbur, but not settling in the seat beside him. "The piglins, yes. I'd imagine you want to learn a bit more about them after your training session with Techno today?"

"You know about that?" Wilbur asked without thinking, before mentally smacking himself for the stupid question. Of course he knew. There was no reason for Technoblade not to tell Philza about it.

Apparently, Philza thought it was a stupid question too, and his mocking laughter sent heat to Wilbur's cheeks. "Yes, he told me all about it. Mentioned how Prince Theseus has a natural knack for fighting, while you..."

"Do not," Wilbur finished for him, setting the holo-pad down on the desk. "Yes, I'm aware."

"Are you embarrassed by this?" Philza asked, leaning against the side of the desk. His wings brushed Wilbur's shoulder, and he had to suppress the urge to flinch in surprise.

"No. I've never been inclined to that sort of thing anyway," Wilbur said, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

Philza hummed, and his feathers ruffled with the sound. "I didn't think so. You prefer fights with words to actual physical encounters, isn't that right?"

Wilbur clenched his jaw. "I suppose you could say that."

A beat of silence hung heavily in the air between them. Wilbur's own breathing echoed in his ears, his heart slamming against his ribcage as he tried to think of how to extricate himself from this situation. He wasn't awake enough to play these mind games with Philza. Not right now. Not when he was so off his game from the events of that day.

"That makes sense, I suppose," Philza said thoughtfully. "Though I must admit, it's a bit of a shame."

Wilbur frowned. "What's a shame?"

Looking down at him then, Philza smiled, and it was that same razor sharp smile that turned Wilbur's blood to ice. "It's a shame that the sirens don't teach their sons how to use their Voice. Seems like you would be rather good at that."

And suddenly, Wilbur's heart dropped into his stomach as the realization hit him.

The library lights were off. They were off, and the entire room was cast in shadows. Despite the light pouring in from the window, it was faint. That meant that in that moment, Wilbur was cast in a gloom dark enough for the freckles on his face to be glowing bright blue.

Philza was standing right in front of him. And now that he was actually paying attention, Wilbur could clearly see the light from his own freckles casting a faint glow over Philza's face.

"I- I-"

"Now it makes sense why you got so nervous when I brought Themis up before," Philza said, cutting Wilbur off. He reached out with his clawed hand, gently grabbing Wilbur's chin and tilting his face up towards him. Wilbur was struggling to keep his breathing even as Philza's eyes roamed over his glowing cheeks, knowing full well that only one species in the entire known universe had fluorescent freckles like that. "You know, I thought you might not fully be human. Your ears are just barely pointed, and your teeth are just a tad too sharp. But I

figured those might just be traits you inherited from the father you don't share with Prince Theseus. That's not the case though, is it?"

Wilbur swallowed down the lump in his throat, knowing there was no use in keeping up the lie now. "No. Our mother was a siren, so we are both half-siren, and half human," he admitted softly.

"And that's why Eldingvegr has a close relationship with Themis," Philza muttered, still holding onto his chin. "If I'm getting this right, Prince Theseus was the product of an arranged marriage between your mother, and the King of Eldingvegr?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"And you were a child she had before her arranged marriage had been put into place?" Philza pushed, raising an eyebrow. "Or did she have an affair after she was already married to the King?"

Wilbur grit his teeth. "The first one," he forced out. "My mother would never have jeopardized the alliance like that." With that, he ripped his face out of Philza's grip, and scowled when Philza let his hand drop without a fight.

"Did you ever meet your father?" Philza then asked, folding his hands in front of him.

"No," Wilbur confessed, eyes dropping to his lap. "All she ever told me was that he was some human man she spent a night with on an Outer Sector planet when she was trying to run away from her royal duties. Her mother found her though, and it wasn't until she was back on Themis that she found out she was pregnant."

"Do you ever wish you could've met him?"

Now that made Wilbur pause. He stared at his hands in his lap, twisting his fingers together as he tried to think if he ever had any desire to meet his father. Because he knew the answer, but it felt like it wasn't the thing you were supposed to say.

Still, it was the truth. And he had no reason to lie about this to Philza.

"No. I had my mother, and later I had Tommy."

Philza hummed at this. "And yet you don't mention Prince Theseus' father. Is there a reason for that?"

He should argue that he just forgot to mention him. Philza didn't need to know about Wilbur's relationship with the King of Eldingvegr. About his cold looks or the cruel ways he dismissed Wilbur, as if he wanted to forget his existence entirely.

But Wilbur couldn't bring himself to try and defend the man. To pretend like he meant anything to Wilbur when he'd made it more than obvious that Wilbur was little more than a bug underneath his shoe to him. So instead, Wilbur just... stayed quiet.

Philza understood his silence loud and clear.

“He wasn’t fond of the fact that his wife came with baggage, is that it?”

Wilbur winced at the question, and suddenly, there was a clawed hand resting on his shoulder.

“Does that bother you, Orpheus?” Philza whispered, crouching down so he was no longer standing over Wilbur as he sat. “Being referred to as baggage?”

Once again, Wilbur noticed that he didn’t use his title. Fine. Two could play at that game.

“What do you think, *Philza*?” Wilbur asked, narrowing his eyes and emphasizing his name, despite how strange it felt on his tongue. “Would you enjoy being referred to as baggage?”

To his frustration, Philza chuckled at this, and squeezed his shoulder. “I’ve been called far worse than that, mate. But yes, I suppose it would bother me if I was your age.”

*Your age.* Another dig at his immaturity. Philza couldn’t help but try to drive a knife straight between his ribs every time they spoke. It was like he relished in frustrating Wilbur, upsetting him for his own amusement.

“I’m not a foolish child for having a problem with insults directed right at my face,” Wilbur snapped, his eyes locking onto Philza’s icy ones.

The laughter that rang out of Philza’s chest at this sparked flames inside of Wilbur, and it took everything in his power not to slap Philza’s hand off of his shoulder right then and there.

“Really? Because I have a feeling you’ve received your fair share of insults just like that plenty of times before,” Philza pointed out, still smiling at him. “I’d assume you’d be used to it by now. Let comments like that roll right off your back. After all, that’s the kind of thick skin you need in politics.”

At his side, Wilbur curled his fingers into a fist. “It’s difficult, yes. But I’ve learned to manage it.”

“Have you though?” Philza pushed, raising an eyebrow. “Because from what I’ve seen, a part of you wants pity. You want others to look at you and think, ‘oh that poor child has been disregarded and berated his entire life. How sad for him.’”

“Excuse me-”

“But the other part of you doesn’t want that,” Philza continued, cutting off Wilbur’s protest. “You want to be viewed as a ruthless politician. You want to sit at the adults table and play the games the rest of us do, because you’re desperate to be taken seriously. But that’s never going to happen if you still want people to pity you.”

“I don’t want pity!” Wilbur hissed, finally pushing Philza’s hand off his shoulder.

Philza huffed at this, rolling his eyes as though Wilbur was a child throwing a tantrum that wasn’t worth his time. He pushed to his feet, and rolled his shoulders out, the feathers behind him rustling with the movement.

“You’re young, but you’re *not* an idiot.” Philza snapped, his smile gone now. “If you don’t want pity, then stop acting like a kicked fucking puppy, Orpheus.”

And with that, Philza left the room, the library door sliding shut behind him.

## Chapter End Notes

*summary of the first half:* Wilbur and Tommy are summoned to the Imperator and the Emperor's wing of the palace. Techno wants to train with them both since he's sure they don't have much to do, and finds out neither one of them has ever been trained in fighting. Wilbur is reluctant to train and show off weakness to the Imperator like that, but Tommy doesn't see an issue with it. They all start to train together, Wilbur isn't very good at it but Tommy is a natural. Ranboo joins them, and Techno and Tommy end up sparring while Wilbur and Ranboo spar. Towards the end of the session, Wilbur hears laughter, realizes Tommy is laughing and having fun with Techno, and is bothered by this.

okay I hope you guys enjoyed!! god that ending scene with Phil was so so fun to write, I've literally had that scene in my head for ages and I was so excited to finally write it. things are certainly heading in a direction :) so I'm very hyped for things to start moving forward now

oh yeah also update from my last authors notes: yeah I had covid. I'm past the point of being contagious and I feel still a little bit sick, but mostly back to normal. I was extremely out of it for most of the last week though whoops

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

there's a spotify playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)!

hope you guys enjoyed the chapter! it was a little strange to get back into the groove of writing after everything, but I'm very happy with how it turned out overall. I hope you all again are taking care of yourselves. please leave a comment if you enjoyed! I don't reply to most but I promise I read them all and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees



# drinks with the enemy

## Chapter Summary

There's another negotiation regarding the fate of Eldingvegr, and Wilbur's control slips through his fingers.

## Chapter Notes

hi lovelies here I am with more!!

as always thank you so much for all the attention you're giving this fic, I'm really really glad you guys are enjoying reading it just as much as I am writing it! I'm starting to think updating this thing every 10 days might become the norm, but again I don't really keep a schedule in mind, I just try to update it when I have the opportunity to. I'm still taking summer classes though (yes I know I said I graduated but, like, technicalities) so I'm literally gonna post this and immediately watch some lectures on the biology of pregnancy afterwards lmao

anyway, hope you guys enjoy this one! it's over 9k words! (did not mean for it to be that long)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Ranboo, what are you doing here?”

The question seemed to startle the enderian, who flinched before whirling around, eyes wide as his gaze darted over both Wilbur and Tommy. After a beat though, he seemingly realized it was just them, and his shoulders slumped in relief.

“Oh, uh, I’m actually on my way to the meeting!” Ranboo explained, gesturing down the hall towards the negotiations room.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “You’re going to be part of our meeting today?”

“Yup! I’m not really gonna say much, Techno just wants me to see how it all works,” Ranboo told them both, folding his hands in front of him.

His expression was innocent enough, but Wilbur couldn’t help the suspicion that curled up in his chest hearing this. Was Ranboo really that important to the Emperor that he was going to listen into a negotiation with some of the most important figures in the Antarctic Empire?

It had been nearly two days since Wilbur and Tommy had trained with Technoblade and Ranboo. Subsequently, this also meant it had been nearly two days since Philza had discovered that Wilbur and Tommy were both half-siren. The following morning after that interaction, Wilbur had been expecting... well, he wasn't sure what, but he'd been expecting something. Someone to make a comment about it. Someone to ask why they had kept it a secret. Someone to acknowledge what Wilbur was certain was palace-wide information by now.

Except no one did. Not one single person gave him or Tommy a second glance that following day, and Wilbur realized that Philza most likely hadn't told anyone. Either that, or he only told a limited few who were keeping the information on tight lockdown. If that was the case, it then begged the question of why? Why would Philza keep it a secret when he had no reason to? Wilbur wasn't sure. It didn't make any sense, because there was no benefit to Philza keeping their heritage private.

Unless... that was the point. He wanted to hold it over Wilbur's head that he knew what they were and where their mother came from. But then again, it's not like he could exactly blackmail Wilbur with that. It had mainly been Philza he'd been wanting to keep the secret from, and now that he knew, it wasn't like it would change much for everyone else to find out.

The entire situation was strange. Tommy had said the same thing when Wilbur shamefully admitted his mistake the morning after the encounter.

*"You didn't fucking realize that your freckles were visible in the dark ass library?" Tommy questioned, his hair still mussed up from sleep.*

*"I didn't think that Philza was gonna just show up in the dead of night!" Wilbur defended. "He scared the shit out of me because I didn't even hear him until he was already standing in the damn doorway!"*

*"So what, he confronted you and you just gave up our whole life story?"*

*Wilbur huffed. "I didn't want to seem like I was hiding anything else from him, so I told him the basics."*

*"But he doesn't know we can use our Voices?" Tommy asked, dropping his voice to a whisper.*

*"Of course not," Wilbur shook his head. "And he's not going to find out. As far as he knows, we're basically just humans with glowing freckles. He doesn't need to know anything else."*

Tommy had been pissed, but he eventually calmed down and reassured Wilbur that it wasn't his fault. While Wilbur appreciated the sentiment, it was technically his fault. If he hadn't wandered into the library in the middle of the night in the first place, this wouldn't have happened. But there was nothing they could do about it now, save for making sure Philza didn't find out about the biggest trump card they both had.

The two of them had waited that entire day for someone to bring it up. But when no one did, it had troubled the brothers to the point where it was all they talked about that night. Wilbur and Tommy agreed it was off-putting, but like so many things these days, there was nothing they could do but hope it didn't come back to bite them in the ass.

For the first time in days though, they were heading to another negotiations meeting. Jack had told them the plan on their way to breakfast, and Wilbur struggled to ignore the nervousness lighting up his veins as he tried to predict what they were going to be discussing. Because before the two of them had been excluded from the meetings, they had just been talking about the Essempi invasion. Wilbur knew all the leaders probably wanted the Empire to take control of Eldingvegr, and he was starting to wonder if he and Tommy were fighting a losing battle with this entire situation.

No. He had to keep his head held high and stay focused on the goal. They weren't going to lose Eldingvegr to the Antarctic Empire. Wilbur refused to lose to Philza, especially after their recent conversations.

He wasn't a kicked fucking puppy. And he was going to prove that to the asshole.

"So what are you guys thinking the discussions are gonna be about today?"

Ranboo's question cut into Wilbur's thoughts, and he blinked as he realized the three of them were walking towards the negotiations room together now.

"I dunno, probably trade shit," Tommy shrugged. His face was neutral, and to an outsider it would seem like he didn't care, but Wilbur could read the tightness in his jaw and the worry in his eyes. Trade shit was actually extremely important to their negotiations, and Tommy knew that just as well as Wilbur did. He didn't want Ranboo to see it, but he was nervous.

Reaching out, Wilbur squeezed Tommy's fingers, with the gesture quickly being returned. Ranboo, who was walking a few steps ahead of them, didn't notice.

"Like blaziphane trading?" Ranboo pushed, raising an eyebrow.

Tommy and Wilbur shared a brief glance, before Tommy nodded. "Yeah, probably. It's kind of the hot topic of this entire summit, y'know?"

"Oh, um, yeah. That makes sense," Ranboo agreed, laughing nervously. "Sorry, I just don't really know what to expect in there, and you two have already done a few of these meetings so I just thought I'd ask."

The suspicion in Tommy's eyes died out as understanding took its place, while Wilbur kept his eyes narrowed at the boy. While it made sense for Ranboo to be nervous about participating in a meeting as important as this for the first time, he couldn't help but wonder if there was more to it than that. If there was a reason Ranboo was supposed to be in this meeting outside of just getting experience.

"Nah, you're fine, man. I was scared shitless the first time I had to sit in on one of these," Tommy reassured him, nudging Ranboo's side with his elbow as he let go of Wilbur's hand.

“It’s mostly a lot of boring talk about policies and stuff, but if they start being assholes about blasphane... well, Wil and I will have to remind them of our stance.”

Ranboo’s brows furrowed. “And that stance is...?”

“That we’re not handing over control of the fucking blasphane,” Tommy said before Wilbur could cut in. “Figured that would be obvious.”

“I mean, I guess that makes sense. But you guys aren’t willing to negotiate on that at all?” Ranboo asked, glancing between them both.

This time, Wilbur spoke before Tommy could. “We’re willing to negotiate terms regarding how much we sell blasphane to the Empire for, but we’re still working out the details,” he explained, his tone holding a sharp edge to it. “You’d understand if you’d been to our other meetings, but those weren’t your concern, so you’ll just see once we get inside.”

Ranboo opened his mouth again, seemingly to ask another question. But his eyes darted over to Wilbur’s face, and after a beat, he went quiet and ducked his head, as if changing his mind.

A sharp pain bloomed in Wilbur’s side as Tommy elbowed him. Hissing between his teeth, Wilbur raised an eyebrow at Tommy in silent question, and found Tommy was giving him a dirty look.

Great. Tommy was upset at him for being mean to Ranboo. It’s not like Wilbur had insulted him. He just pointed out that these things weren’t exactly Ranboo’s concern unless they came up during this meeting. He figured it was a valid response to Ranboo being so nosy, but judging by the weight of Tommy’s glare on the back of his head, his little brother didn’t think the same.

They turned a corner, and saw a few of the other leaders already filing inside the negotiations room. Wilbur, Tommy, and Ranboo followed them in, and Wilbur internally groaned when he realized they were going to be seated in the same spots they had been during the first meeting. This meant that he was going to be sitting right next to Philza, which was the absolute last thing he wanted considering he hadn’t seen the man since their conversation in the library.

Ranboo settled himself in a chair that had been placed behind Technoblade’s. A silent signifier that he wasn’t meant to be part of the discussion, he was only there to watch. As Wilbur watched him sit down, the boy caught his eye and gave him a small wave, which Wilbur ignored as he turned back to the doors of the room.

Everyone filed in much in the same manner that they had during the first meeting. Tina and Karl were already settled in, with Karl whispering something to Tina, and her nodding intently as she listened. The black hairpiece that reminded Wilbur of a halo was still settled on her head, and she was wearing another short red dress, intricately embroidered with black and gold stitching. Karl was similar in that he was wearing practically the same thing he had on the first day, with just the embroidered designs on his cloak being different every time Wilbur saw him. This time, Wilbur also noticed a small, velvet pouch resting on the table in

front of him, and Wilbur watched as he stuck his hand inside while still talking to Tina, pulling out a dried mushroom to pop in his mouth.

Schlatt, unsurprisingly, looked as though he was half-asleep as he slumped down in his seat. Despite the fact that the palace was heated, he was wearing another ridiculously heavy coat decorated with fine furs and metal chains, and Wilbur wondered how he wasn't melting in it. Beside him, Michael was nursing what he guessed was a cup of coffee, and he slapped Schlatt's hand away when the man reached out to try and take a sip for himself.

The Badlands were as put together as ever, with Seapeekay and Antfrost speaking in low voices with their ears perked up, while Sam and Bad stood behind their chairs to talk to each other as well. Wilbur noticed the Badlands all stealing a few glances at him and Tommy, and Wilbur made sure to sit straighter in his seat, smoothing out his face to make sure his expression was unreadable.

Lastly, Philza and Technoblade arrived, with Puffy hanging back by the door once more. Wilbur tried not to stiffen as Philza sat down beside him, doing everything in his power to keep his expression unreadable as the man's feathers brushed over his shoulders. Philza didn't say anything to him, didn't even give him a second glance as he settled himself at the table. Wilbur wasn't sure if that was a relief, or if it just made his nerves worse.

To Philza's right, Technoblade had also sat down, and was twisted around in his seat so he could talk to Ranboo. Before Wilbur could try and figure out what they were saying though, Philza cleared his throat, and everyone fell silent as all attention turned to him.

"Good morning to all of you, glad we could all be here once again," Philza began, folding his hands in front of him. "I don't think we need to waste any time with small talk, and can just jump straight into catching Prince Theseus and Prince Orpheus up on what we've been discussing in our past few meetings. Is that alright with you both?"

It was a courtesy question, not a genuine one. There was no kindness in Philza's eyes as he raised an eyebrow at Wilbur. It was a silent dare, but Wilbur didn't know what he was being dared to do.

"Fine by me," Tommy said, resting his elbows on the table.

"I'm alright with this as well," Wilbur agreed.

Philza nodded. "Alright. Well, over our past few meetings, we've been discussing different potential trade agreements we could reach regarding blaziphane export from Eldingvegr."

"And what was the conclusion?" Tommy asked, leaning over to get a better view of Philza since Wilbur was sitting between them.

"While we understand your desire to retain Eldingvegr's independence, I think we're all in agreement here that that just doesn't seem viable at this point in time," Philza declared, his face as neutral as if he was discussing the weather.

Tommy clenched his jaw. "So what are you proposing?"

Silence hung over the room for a moment. Tommy knew what Philza was saying. Wilbur could tell that he knew. But he wanted Philza to state it outright. To put the truth of this discussion into words instead of dancing around the reality.

“Join the Empire,” Philza finally said, the silence shattering like glass. “Instead of us just taking control of the blaziphane trade like we originally suggested, Eldingvegr can join the Antarctic Empire officially.”

There was no surprise that came with Philza’s words. Even if it hadn’t been stated directly to Wilbur and Tommy’s faces until now, Wilbur had overheard them discussing this option during that secret meeting several nights back, and even before then Philza had been pushing for this very result in everything but name. But it was one thing for Philza to imply that he wanted to take over Eldingvegr, and a whole other thing for him to formally declare it in a negotiation.

This wasn’t a hypothetical anymore. Eldingvegr was the Antarctic Empire’s newest target.

“No way,” Tommy shot back before Wilbur could even gather his thoughts. “If we joined the Empire, it would literally be the same thing as you taking over the blaziphane trade but with even more restrictions placed onto us. Why would we ever even *think about* accepting that?”

Wilbur blinked, surprised at how well Tommy was holding his tongue and keeping his tone respectful. Although there was anger blazing in his bright eyes, he was under control. His composure was measured, and his words rang with a confidence Wilbur found himself envious of.

“Because you’d be far more protected under the Antarctic Empire’s rule than you would be as an ally,” Technoblade cut in. “Your planet is one of the largest targets for hostile takeover in the galaxy, and frankly, it’s pretty surprising you’ve managed to remain independent for this long.”

“Then who’s to say we can’t stay independent from here on out?” Tommy pushed.

Technoblade raised an eyebrow. “Your planet is literally under control of another Empire right now. And although Essempi won’t remain in control of it for long, it’s proven that Eldingvegr *can* be won. If we simply chase Essempi out and then leave you guys alone again, I guarantee you’ll be attacked again within months.”

“The only reason Essempi took us over so easily was because we were betrayed,” Tommy snapped, glaring at Technoblade. “If Eret hadn’t sold us out, we would’ve been able to fight Essempi off.”

“You don’t know that,” Technoblade shot back evenly. “Eret’s betrayal prevented bloodshed, but it doesn’t mean that Essempi necessarily needed to make a deal with them. The only reason no other planet has messed with you so far is because no one was willing to take the risk of messing up the blaziphane trade. But now that Dream’s gone and done it, the status quo is broken, and it can’t be pieced back together like nothing happened.”

“Are you suggesting that our military is insufficient?” Tommy questioned, something dangerous dripping off his words.

Technoblade didn’t seem impressed at Tommy’s attempt to intimidate him. “Compared to Essempi’s? Yes. Compared to ours? Absolutely. You’re one planet going up against empires here. The fight is never going to be even.”

Narrowing his eyes, Tommy was at an obvious loss for words as his shoulders dropped. His gaze met Wilbur’s, and Wilbur could read the silent pleading loud and clear. Tommy was out of his depth again, meaning that it was Wilbur’s turn to step in.

“You seem to think we don’t have allies of our own,” Wilbur said, drawing all eyes to him.

While Technoblade’s brows furrowed, a knowing smile flashed over Philza’s face.

“You’re referring to Themis?” Philza asked.

Meeting that icy gaze again, Wilbur nodded. “Yes. We’ve been allied with Themis since our mother, who was part of the Themisian royal family, married Theseus’ father.”

Like Wilbur suspected, there was no sign of surprise from the leaders in the room. They were listening intently, but no one blinked twice at the admission that Wilbur and Tommy were half siren. They had all already been told this by Philza.

Suddenly, it was Wilbur’s turn to be surprised as Schlatt leaned forward, his eyes half-lidded as he messed with the rings on his fingers. “If you’re allied with Themis, then why don’t they seem to care that Essempi took you over?”

“Well, Themis is known for keeping away from most conflicts in the galaxy,” Antfrost pointed out.

“I fucking know that, whiskers,” Schlatt scoffed, rolling his eyes. “But we know they’re getting better prices for blaziphane from Eldingvegr. If Dream wasn’t gonna uphold that, they’d damn well have something to say about it. But they haven’t said shit. Do you get what I’m trying to say here?”

Shit. Why did Schlatt have to grow a brain *now* of all times?

“I thought we all knew that Dream made a deal with Themis before taking over Eldingvegr?” Karl suddenly cut in, blinking a few times from where he’d been staring at the ceiling. “Or are you guys still just theorizing about that and haven’t actually figured it out? Because I might’ve gotten the date confused.”

Wilbur dug his nails into the palm of his hand, while Philza let out a barking laugh.

“Well, we know now, although it’s not much of a surprise,” Philza said, grinning as his wings rustled behind him. “Themis, it seems, doesn’t give much of a shit about what happens to Eldingvegr as long as their alliance is upheld. Is that right, Prince Orpheus?”

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur struggled to keep his voice level. “Theseus is at the crux of our alliance so I wouldn’t say-”

“But Prince Theseus is sitting right here, and Themis hasn’t asked for his whereabouts once,” Philza pointed out, gesturing to Tommy. “And I doubt Dream would’ve planned to execute you both if he thought it would upset Themis. So it seems like Themis really doesn’t care about you at all.”

“You gotta accept that your mommy’s planet isn’t gonna come save you,” Schlatt taunted from across the table.

“Shut the fuck up!” Tommy snapped, and while normally Wilbur would tell him off for such a blatant disregard for etiquette, he was too caught up in his own frustration to care.

“Yo, can someone put the brat in timeout?” Schlatt then asked, pointing at Tommy.

Oh, that fucking prick.

Sharp pain burst across his palm as Wilbur’s nails broke through the skin because of how hard he was clenching his fist. But as much as he wanted to tell Schlatt off, he knew that he had more important things to focus on.

“Even if we don’t have Themis on our side, it doesn’t mean we’re totally helpless!” Wilbur argued back to the original point, his voice rising as his frustration bubbled to the surface.

“Actually, it kinda does,” Technoblade deadpanned. “You have no one. No allies, no King looking out for you, no advisors—you’re lucky we’re even choosing to negotiate with you, because we don’t have to do this at all.”

Wilbur was sick of this. He was sick of this entire table taunting him and belittling him for things out of his control. He was sick of Schlatt’s stupid jeering and Philza’s creepy smiles and Technoblade’s complete lack of care. And most of all, he was sick of the silent threats sitting above his and Tommy’s heads. The invisible guillotine watching their every move, reminding him that they weren’t safe here. They weren’t safe *anywhere*.

“Then just fucking kill us already!” Wilbur suddenly snapped, slamming his hands down on the table.

A loud gasp echoed over the table, before silence fell like a blanket. Wilbur’s heart was pounding in his ears, and he could feel blood smeared across his palm. The weight of the other leader’s stares were practically suffocating him as they pressed down on his shoulders, down on his head, pushing him down down down into the darkness as he struggled to breathe.

His heart began to slow as the seconds ticked on. The waves were deafening as they crashed against the walls of his skull, but he did his best to force them into silence as he shifted his focus to the others.



Everyone was staring at him. He supposed that was to be expected given the outburst he'd just had, but it still made him nauseated as he took in the different expressions painting everyone's faces.

All of the Badlands members seemed concerned, with furrowed brows and pursed lips free of judgement and instead decorated with worry as their eyes flickered over him. Tina's eyebrows were raised in surprise, looking more curious than worried as she met his eyes evenly. Michael seemed as if he wanted to be sitting literally anywhere but at this table, while Schlatt... well, the only word Wilbur could think to describe Schlatt's face was shocked. Not gleeful. Not amused. Just shocked.

Then, before Wilbur could see the looks he was getting from Philza, Technoblade, Ranboo, and Tommy, someone spoke up.

"Phil," Sam said, a stern note to his voice drawing everyone's attention to him. "Do you see what you're doing to these children?"

The wings behind him puffed up. "We are not discussing this here, *Sam*," Philza shot back, emphasizing Sam's name as a clear warning. "Prince Orpheus, my apologies. Things got out of hand and-

"You don't have to apologize," Wilbur told him, wincing at how hoarse he sounded. The anger that had burned so brightly only moments before was fading away now, being replaced by embarrassment as he realized how out of place his outburst was. "I should be the one apologizing for letting my emotions get the better of me."

With that, he forced himself to sit down again. Tommy immediately pressed himself up against Wilbur's side, leaning over to whisper in his ear, "Are you okay?"

Wilbur nodded. "I'm fine."

It was a lie. But it wasn't like Wilbur could be anything but fine when all the leaders were staring at him like he was going to shatter into pieces at the slightest prodding. He wasn't weak. He *wasn't*. He'd just gotten frustrated. That was all.

Silence continued to suffocate the table. Wilbur straightened up in his seat, squaring his shoulders as he did his best to regain his composure.

"Again, I apologize for my outburst," Wilbur said, his voice steadier than he expected it to be, "but I'm sure you all can understand my frustration. It gets rather tiring to deal with ominous threats on a daily basis, so forgive me if I'm a bit sick of hearing them."

Beneath the table, Tommy kicked his leg, making Wilbur hiss in pain. He gave Tommy a confused look, who was glaring at him now. It seemed like he wasn't happy with the direction Wilbur was taking this discussion.

But then again, it's not like Tommy was doing the talking here. If he didn't like the way Wilbur was handling things, he could speak up himself. Wilbur was tired of holding his hand

through discussions like these when they were already difficult enough to get through on his own.

“Of course that’s understandable, Prince Orpheus,” Ponk said, dipping their head in respect. “No one here will hold your reaction against you.”

“I’m not asking for you all to let me off for my disrespect because you pity me,” Wilbur shot back, glancing at Philza from the corner of his eye. “I’m not asking for pity at all. I would just rather our negotiations be exactly that—negotiations. Not an attempt to threaten me and my brother into agreeing with your goals.”

Beside him, Philza snorted. Frowning, Wilbur turned to fully look at the Emperor, and saw he was stifling a knowing grin behind his hand.

“Phil,” Sam said in an exasperated tone, disappointment flashing over his face. “Do you care to share the humor in what Prince Orpheus said?”

“My apologies, it’s just—” Philza stifled another laugh, taking a breath to calm himself and smooth his features out. “It’s no matter. Let’s return to the subject at hand.”

“No no, please, go on,” Wilbur insisted, already tired of these stupid games.

Philza blinked, his smile fading as he shifted to face Wilbur completely. “Fine. You wish to know my thoughts?” Wilbur nodded, and Philza huffed. “I was laughing because you asked us not to force you and your brother into agreeing with us, but that’s what these kinds of negotiations are. You are outnumbered here, Prince Orpheus. We’re not trying to be unfair. That’s simply the truth.”

“We want to negotiate with you both,” Technoblade jumped in, “but you’re not giving us a lot of room here. A negotiation goes both ways.”

They were lecturing him like a child in front of everyone. Trying to teach him the basics of negotiating as if he were some kind of idiot. It wasn’t just patronizing, it was plain mockery.

Wilbur was back to clenching his fists under the table. He wanted to get up and storm out of the negotiations room so he didn’t have to listen to this bullshit anymore. He wanted to tell Philza and Technoblade to fuck off and that he didn’t care what they thought of him. He wanted to not feel like he was five inches tall when he was surrounded by people who knew they were better than him.

Suddenly, there were nails digging into his arm, and he glanced to the left to see Tommy pulling him back against his seat.

“We understand where you’re coming from,” Tommy told the table, his words taking on that authoritative tone that still sounded so foreign coming from his mouth. “And we appreciate the understanding you’re granting us in turn. My brother hasn’t been feeling well lately, and I think it might be best if we resume these discussions another day, because I don’t think we’re going to make a lot of progress with the current state of things.”

Again, Tommy was far more measured and composed than Wilbur was used to seeing him. Everyone else at the table seemed to be thinking the same thing, with Philza's eyebrows having lifted in surprise, and Technoblade appraising Tommy with an unreadable glint in his eyes. Even Ranboo seemed taken back, mismatched eyes as wide as saucers as he glanced between Wilbur and Tommy.

After a few tense seconds, Philza nodded. "I... I think that would be acceptable. Are we all in agreement with resuming these discussions at another time?"

There was unanimous nodding at the table. As soon as Puffy—who had been silently watching the whole affair from the wall—opened the doors, Tommy was on his feet and dragging Wilbur out of his chair with him. When Wilbur tried to yank his hand out of Tommy's grip, he simply tightened his hold, and Wilbur could only spare a worried glance in Philza's direction before he was being led out of the negotiations room and into the hallway.

It all happened very fast. One moment, they were in the negotiations room. The next, Tommy was pulling Wilbur down the hallway, refusing to even look back at him as they hurried back to their room.

"Tommy, what are you—"

"We'll talk in our room," Tommy snapped, and it was then Wilbur realized what was going on.

Tommy was pissed.

Dread curled in Wilbur's gut as he recognized the stiffness in his little brother's posture and the lines carved into his face. Not only had Wilbur fucked up in the meeting, but now *Tommy* of all people was mad at him. Like he hadn't had his fair share of fuck ups during meetings like that.

Tommy didn't let go of his wrist as he practically slammed on the button to open the doors to their room. He yanked Wilbur inside, only letting go once the doors had slid shut behind them once more.

And then, they were alone.

"Tommy—"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Tommy shouted, whirling on Wilbur with fire burning in his eyes. "This whole goddamn time you've been saying we have to be polite, we have to follow etiquette but that? That was fucking insane, Wilbur!"

Sighing, Wilbur pinched the bridge of his nose as Tommy began to pace the length of the room. "Look, I know I got a bit worked up, but you have to admit they were spewing a ridiculous amount of bullshit at us."

"A bit worked up?" Tommy let out a bitter laugh that reminded Wilbur of nails scratching glass. "You challenged them to fucking kill us, you idiot! And then you went and made us

look like dumbasses because you were upset that they were being ominous and threatening—like they haven't been doing that ever since we first got here!"

"You think I don't fucking know that?!" Wilbur exclaimed, twisting his fingers into his hair. "Trust me, I know I messed up! But you've lost your cool plenty of times before, so why the fuck can't I?"

That seemed to strike a chord in Tommy. His shoulders heaved as he took a few deep breaths, the anger slowly draining out of his face as something stony and cold was left in its place.

"Just... try to chill the fuck out. We don't need them getting more pissed at us than they already are," Tommy sighed, heading back towards the door.

Frowning, Wilbur stood frozen in the center of the room as the doors slid open. "Where are you going?"

"To go see if Techno wants to train," Tommy said, glancing back at Wilbur over his shoulder. "Do you want to come with?"

Did he want to go train with Technoblade again? To play even more of those stupid mind games and hear him taunt the both of them about how defenseless they were when they'd already spent the past hour being belittled like that?

"No thanks," Wilbur scoffed, falling back on the bed.

Tommy shrugged. "Alright then."

He turned to walk out of the room, and Wilbur sat up. "Wait, you're still going?"

Pausing midstep, Tommy nodded. "Um, yeah? Just because you're not going doesn't mean I can't go train if I want."

That... That was true. Despite how much Wilbur hated the idea of Tommy going off without him, he'd already left Tommy alone a few times at this point and things were fine. Nothing was going to happen, and Wilbur knew that.

Still, he didn't like the idea of Tommy spending time with Technoblade alone.

"Just... watch yourself," Wilbur warned, curling his fingers into the blankets. "Don't say anything about our plans to him."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Wilbur knew he'd fucked up. Tommy scowled, the blue flames flickering behind his eyes as he glared at his brother.

"I'm not that much of a fucking idiot," Tommy hissed.

Then, before Wilbur could try to apologize or explain himself, Tommy was storming out of the room. The door slid shut behind him, and Wilbur found himself alone.

Groaning, Wilbur fell back onto the bed again. Great. He'd fucked up in so many different ways today. Philza had told him to stop acting like an idiot, and here Wilbur was, making a fool of himself in even worse ways than before. Now he had Tommy pissed at him as well, and Wilbur couldn't even bring himself to go after him.

In a way, it was like he was a weather-beaten pillar in the middle of a stormy sea. Every insult, every reminder that they were helpless, every taunting smirk—it put more and more weight on the pillar. His foundations were crumbling, and it was only going to be a matter of time before the rocks that made up his very being broke apart into the tumultuous waters below.

If Niki was here, this wouldn't be happening. He would be able to ask her what she thought he should do, and she would give him her honest advice. In a way, they had been two pillars leaning against one another. Both being battered at from every side by the crashing waves, holding each other up because no one else was going to give them support.

But now his other pillar was gone. He was standing on his own, and he wasn't built to withstand these waves alone. Wilbur was failing. And this was the one place where failure wasn't an option.

*"Failure isn't an option," Niki told him, her voice soft but firm as her freckles glowed in the dim light of the bedroom.*

*"Failure isn't an option," Wilbur repeated, twisting his fingers in his lap. "Is that what they tell you during your lessons?"*

*Niki nodded, the blanket they were both huddled under shifting with the movement. "If you believe your Voice can't fail, it won't. You just have to let your mind trust in your own abilities. And remember to keep your pitch high with your voice sitting in your head, not your throat."*

*Taking a shaky breath, Wilbur shut his eyes again, repeating the mantra he could still hear in his mother's voice even though it had been three years since her death.*

*"Okay," he whispered, listening to the waves quiet in his mind. "Okay."*

*His eyes flickered open. He stared at Niki, and focused on the distant roar of the ocean in his ears.*

*"Lift your hand."*

*Wilbur gasped when his Voice echoed out from his lips, thousands of voices layered on top of one another as they dug down to the bones of anyone listening, forcing them to obey.*

*For a brief moment, Niki's right hand began to lift up.*

*But then, before it even got an inch above her knee, she dropped the hand again. Pain blossomed in Wilbur's throat at the effort, and Niki frowned in sympathy.*

*"That was a really good effort!" She told him, her smile just on the edge of being forced.*

*“But it wasn’t good enough,” Wilbur grumbled, his voice hoarse from the attempt.*

*A warm hand wrapped around his own, forcing Wilbur to look up from his lap.*

*“It was good enough because you tried. You just have to keep trying like that until you get it right,” Niki reassured him, squeezing his fingers.*

*“Is that another thing they tell you in your lessons?”*

*At that, Niki faltered. Her smile faded, and she slowly pulled her hand away.*

*“No. They tell me that if I fail, it’s my own fault because there’s no outside reason I should be failing,” she admitted, her pink hair falling into her eyes. “That doesn’t apply to you though, because you do have a reason to fail. You know it’s harder for boys to learn how to use their Voice than it is for girls. So don’t get too down on yourself.”*

*This made Wilbur frown. “You shouldn’t get down on yourself either though. Just because it’s easier for you doesn’t mean you aren’t allowed to struggle.”*

*Niki shook her head. “I appreciate it, Wil, but that’s not true. I just need to be better.”*

*Frown deepening, Wilbur reached out for Niki’s hands again. She sighed as he wrapped his fingers around hers, her webbing soft against his skin. “This goes both ways, Niki. We’re both still learning. Fuck what the Ambassadors say. You’re doing insanely well, especially considering you’ve only had a few lessons so far.”*

*There was a beat of silence as Niki considered his words. Then, she let out a deep breath, and squeezed his hands in return. “Fine. But you also need to know you’re doing incredible for both being a boy learning this, and also not even getting formal lessons like I am.”*

*Although it was difficult for Wilbur to believe, he made himself nod anyway. “We’re both brilliant then, how’s that?”*

*“Well-” Niki cut herself off with a giggle, “I suppose I can’t argue with that.”*

*With one last squeeze, Wilbur let go of her hands. “Alright, let’s try again then. You command me and I’ll try to mimic you.”*

Wilbur was startled by a knock on his door.

Blinking back into awareness, he realized that he’d been somewhat dozing for the past hour. His eyes were heavy, and his legs shook as he stumbled to his feet. The knocking on the door continued, and it wasn’t until he was standing right in front of it that he remembered Tommy wasn’t here.

Fear woke him up like a slap to the face. Had something happened to Tommy? If it was Tommy at the door, he would just let himself in. But if it wasn’t him, who else would be knocking at the door to get his attention?

Fuck. He was too out of it to properly think right now.

Trying to shake off his anxiety-ridden thoughts, Wilbur pressed the button to open the door, and found himself face to face with Jack Manifold.

“Oh, Jack,” Wilbur said, relief sweeping through him as he realized that Jack was probably just here to take him to dinner or something. “Is it dinner time already?”

Jack shook his head. “Nah, you got a few hours till then. But I was told to bring this to you.”

Before Wilbur could ask what it was, Jack was handing him a small, black earpiece. Frowning, Wilbur tucked the earpiece in his ear, and pressed the play button on the side of it.

*“Hey loverboy, things got a little heated during the meeting today. I wanna talk with you about something, so how about you stop by my room for a drink and a chat before dinner? Also, don’t bring the kid. You’re sitting at the grown-ups table now.”*

Although he didn’t sign off, Wilbur had no problem identifying the voice as belonging to Schlatt. He could practically smell the liquor on his breath over the voice memo, and it made him wince as he handed the earpiece back to Jack’s outstretched palm.

“He wants me to come over right now?” Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow at Jack.

“Yeah, I think so. He just told me to give this to you and escort you to his room after you listened to it,” Jack said, pocketing the earpiece again.

Well... that was unusual. Why would Schlatt of all people want to talk to him one on one? They didn’t even hold up a facade of friendliness with one another. Maybe he would expect something like this from the Badlands or even Tina and Karl, but *Schlatt*?

It didn’t make sense. And Wilbur had to admit, despite how much he despised the man, it made him intrigued. If Schlatt was going out of his way to invite Wilbur to his room, he must have something important to say.

So even though the last thing Wilbur wanted to do was go willingly spend time with Schlatt, his curiosity got the better of him. Without a second thought, he nodded at Jack to lead the way, pausing only to put his shoes back on before following the guard down the hallway.

They made their way down the twisting halls once again, with Jack leading him into another unfamiliar part of the palace. This must’ve been where the other leaders were housed, given the rows of black doors identical to the one that led to his and Tommy’s room.

Their footsteps echoed off the dark grey walls. Wilbur tugged his dark teal coat tighter around him despite the fact that it wasn’t even cold in the hallway. Chills were just racing down his arms for no reason, and Wilbur was grateful he was wearing long sleeves so no one would be able to see.

At one point, they passed by another unmarked black door. Wilbur didn’t look twice at it, but as soon as he stepped in front of it, it slid open with a soft *whoosh*.

“Oh, Prince Orpheus!”

Wilbur froze in place when he saw Karl standing in the doorway, waving him down like he was all the way across a field. Ahead of him, Jack stopped walking, only glancing over his shoulder before fixing his gaze straight ahead.

Right. As a guard, Jack wasn't supposed to be a part of conversations between Wilbur and other leaders. That meant Wilbur was on his own.

"Uh, hello Seer," Wilbur greeted, dipping his head in respect at the man. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Karl stared at him for a moment, golden eyes blinking rapidly as if he was struggling to focus on Wilbur's face. Then, he was rushing forward, and Wilbur almost jumped back when Karl stopped only a foot in front of him.

"I need to tell you something, Orpheus," Karl said, placing both hands on his shoulders.

Wilbur had to hunch down a bit so they were eye to eye. "What is it?" He asked, so taken back by the whole encounter that he didn't even notice Karl not using his title.

Blinking a few more times, Karl refocused his gaze on Wilbur's face. "I know you're scared, but I wanna tell you you shouldn't be," he said, his expression dead serious. "Things seem, like, really messed up right now. I get it. But I know where this ends, and let me tell you, it's pretty great for you and Theseus."

"What do you see?" Wilbur asked for lack of anything else to say.

"I see..." Karl blinked again, his eyes fixing on a point over Wilbur's shoulder. "I see a lot of things. Things I can't tell you. But what I *can* tell you is that you need to stop getting so worked up during the negotiations because you're gonna end up joining the Antarctic Empire anyway."

Just like that, all the amusement he held for Karl's antics withered away as a rock dropped into the pit of his stomach. "No."

"Yes," Karl nodded. "You're gonna join, and it's gonna be really great for you guys. But the longer you drag this out, the harder it's gonna be for everyone involved."

Scowling, Wilbur pushed Karl's hands off of him. "You can't just tell me our negotiations are going to fail and expect me to believe you."

To his frustration, his anger just made Karl laugh. "I knew you were gonna say that!"

"Then why did you even bother telling me?" Wilbur hissed, taking a step back from him.

Karl shrugged, turning back into his room. "I have my reasons. Now have fun talking to Schlatt! You guys are gonna have an interesting conversation."

And just like that, before Wilbur could ask Karl what the fuck that meant, the door was shutting behind him once more. So Wilbur was left standing in the middle of the hallway, a black hole sitting in his gut as he stared at a plain black door.



He had to be lying. Karl was part of Kinoko, and they had every reason to want Eldingvegr to join the Antarctic Empire, just like the rest of the planets did. Since Karl ‘supposedly’ saw the future, he was trying to convince Wilbur that he was going to join no matter what, so he needed to let it happen. Yeah, right. Why would Karl tell Wilbur that if he knew it was just going to piss Wilbur off? If they were going to join no matter what, wouldn’t it make more sense for Karl to not tell them about it?

Wilbur didn’t know. But it smelled enough like bullshit to him for him to brush it off for the time being, and after a few stunned seconds of silence, he turned back to Jack.

“That was fuckin’ weird,” Jack muttered as he went back to leading Wilbur down the hall.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Wilbur huffed, wrapping his arms around himself.

Neither of them said anything for the rest of the walk. Which, in turn, wasn’t that long because Schlatt’s room was only a few doors down from Karl’s. Like the other doors, there was nothing really indicating who was staying in the room, but Jack seemed confident as he gestured for Wilbur to knock.

Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur straightened out his coat and did his best to smooth out his hair. While he had no idea what Schlatt wanted to talk to him about, he was going to have to be careful to not let Schlatt get under his skin. Especially not after the disaster that was the meeting earlier.

With one last moment to gather himself, Wilbur then stepped forward and knocked on the door.

One second passed. And then another.

Then, it opened up to reveal a grinning Schlatt.

“Damn, you’re quick,” Schlatt said, his bloodshot eyes looking him up and down. After a moment of considering him, Schlatt then stepped aside and gestured for Wilbur to come into the room. “Get in here. I just cracked open the vodka.”

With one last glance back at Jack, Wilbur stepped inside the room, and the door hissed as it slid shut.

Schlatt’s room was largely the same as his own. Similar size, bed, desk and chairs—with the only difference being that the fireplace was actually lit, whereas Wilbur and Tommy hadn’t lit theirs since that first night.

Orange flames created dancing shadows along the walls. There was a glass bottle of clear liquid covered in frost, with two crystalline glasses sitting on a table in between the two chairs. Schlatt was dressed far more casually than Wilbur had seen him before, with his many fur layers having been discarded and revealing that he was actually far less imposing than the bulky clothes made him appear. He wasn’t that much shorter than Wilbur, but the difference was still noticeable. He was dressed in only a stained button-down shirt that was only half tucked into his pants, and the thick pair of trousers that he’d been wearing at the meeting

earlier that day. Even the rings and chains that usually adorned him were gone, and Wilbur noticed the jewelry scattered on top of his desk—as if he'd just tossed it off without a second thought when he'd gotten inside.

“Come on in, Orpheus. Sit down,” Schlatt said, gesturing to one of the chairs. “You don’t mind if I call you Orpheus, right? We can drop the titles if it’s just two guys having a drink, y’know?”

Unlike with Philza, the acknowledgement that he wasn’t calling Wilbur by his title actually comforted him in a strange way. Because Schlatt wasn’t doing this as a power play. He was simply evening out the field and turning this interaction into something casual—not a formal meeting, but just a conversation.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Wilbur agreed, sitting down in the chair Schlatt gestured to.

He watched as the President staggered towards the vodka, twisting off the lid and pouring the clear liquid into both the glasses. He handed Wilbur his glass first, and then sat himself down in the other chair, taking a long swig of his drink once he had settled.

Following his lead, Wilbur took a sip of the vodka and winced at the burn. It was very high quality vodka, that much was obvious. But it was still straight liquor, and while Wilbur had definitely drank before, it wasn’t something he did very often.

“That shit hits the spot, doesn’t it?” Schlatt asked, grinning at Wilbur as he took another sip of his drink. “People weren’t kidding when they said Zephyrs IV has some of the best vodka in the whole damn galaxy.”

“I suppose so,” Wilbur agreed, taking another small sip before he set the glass down.

“You suppose so?” Schlatt laughed, like Wilbur had just told some great joke. “It’s true. You might not have tried a lot of vodka yet, kid, but this is the best of the best. And when people tell you you can find good vodka on Serenity, tell them no you fucking can’t. Michael’s a fine guy, but the vodka from his planet is shit.”

There was a pause as Schlatt took another long swig of his vodka, finishing the glass and pouring another two fingers worth for himself. Wilbur watched, folding his hands in front of him as he waited for Schlatt to set his glass down again.

“While that’s interesting to know, I doubt you just invited me over to teach me about the quality of vodka on different planets,” Wilbur finally said once Schlatt seemed to be done with his drink for the moment.

Schlatt chuckled again, pushing a hand through his dark hair before slumping back in his seat. “Wow, aren’t you fucking bright,” he drawled, and Wilbur clenched his jaw. “Yeah, obviously I called you here for a reason. But first I want you to drop the act.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Schlatt insisted, his dark eyes meeting Wilbur’s. “Drop the prissy polished prince bullshit. We’re not in the court right now. Don’t be all fake polite to me and shit, especially not after your little outburst today.”

Wilbur flushed at the reminder. While he was suspicious of Schlatt telling him it was okay to drop the formal etiquette, he also didn’t see how this could be a trick in any way. Schlatt already barely followed etiquette, so this would just be another way for them to be on the same level.

Fine. If he wanted Wilbur to be himself, he’d get that.

“Alright, I’ll be blunt then. Why the fuck am I here, Schlatt?” Wilbur asked, folding his hands in front of him.

“Whoa! There he is,” Schlatt grinned. “Well *Orpheus*, I’m not gonna sell you some bullshit that I’m worried about you or whatever the fuck. We both know that’s not true. I don’t give two shits about what happens to you and your bratty little brother if it means Mantle gets a sweet discount on blaziphane.” He took another sip of his drink, coughing loudly to clear his throat. “So we’re on the same page here, you know my motivations and all that shit. But I did wanna tell you... a bit of a story, I suppose.”

Wilbur furrowed his brows. “A story?”

“A story!” Schlatt repeated, stretching his arms out above his head. “I’m not a great storyteller or anything, but thought it might be helpful if you knew how Mantle joined the Antarctic Empire.”

This... This was not what Wilbur was expecting.

“Alright, I’m listening.”

“It all started during my first term as President,” Schlatt began, his dark hair curling around his horns. “Basically, Mantle is pretty fucking great financially speaking, but we don’t got a lot else going for us. The military? Shit. Food production? We can grow, like, a few vegetables but not much else because our soil is terrible. The only reason we’re still standing is that we figured out how to use our fusion generators from our gas giant to make super efficient water purification systems, so we’re fine on water! Literally nothing else though.”

Slumping further down in his chair, Schlatt folded his arms over his chest. “I don’t know why the fuck I ran for President. I think I just liked the title, y’know? ‘President J. Texas Schlatt.’ Sounds so damn official. Plus, I like having the power to just do shit. If I don’t like something, I can change it. Except when the planet I’m ruling is fucking dogshit.” He huffed, staring into the dancing flames in the fireplace. “I’m not a man who begs. I’m not fucking pathetic like that. But I had to practically beg to get the Antarctic Empire to take us in.”

...what?

“You asked to join the Antarctic Empire?”

Schlatt nodded. “Sure did. The Empire is a pretty damn sweet deal. Easy access to food trade and protection from all the other shit going on in the galaxy. Who wouldn’t want that?”

“People who don’t want limits on what they can and can’t do with their own planets,” Wilbur shot back, narrowing his eyes at Schlatt.

“Loverboy, if that’s your worry and your choice is between Dream and Philza, you’re an idiot for not going with Philza,” Schlatt snorted.

“But Eldingvegr wants to remain independent of any outside rule,” Wilbur argued.

“And we’re all telling you, that ain’t gonna work,” Schlatt said. “Again, I don’t care what the fuck happens to you and the brat. I’d bring popcorn if Techno decided to break out the guillotine for you both. But since they don’t seem particularly eager to do things the easy way, I figured I might as well let you know that not everyone in the Empire was taken over by force.”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur leaned back in his chair. He stared into the fire, the flames dancing and writhing like living figures as the shadows moved in time on the walls.

“I’m just saying, if you wanna be good at this politics game, then you need to take a good deal when you see one.”

Wilbur didn’t respond to that. Instead, he just picked up his own glass of vodka off the table again, and downed it all in one swig. The drink burnt the back of his throat, and he took a shuddering breath as it warmed the inside of his chest.

This was bullshit. Just a bunch of bullshit Schlatt was trying to put in his head to get him to join the Empire. All he wanted was blaziphane. That was all any of them wanted. It wasn’t about what was best for Eldingvegr, it was for the money their planet could provide the Empire. Wilbur knew this as fact.

So why was Wilbur thinking about it so much?

## Chapter End Notes

so this was a *very* interesting chapter :) wilbur lost his cool a bit, and he got to talk to schlatt one on one. how we feeling about that?

hope you guys enjoyed! as always I dont know when I'm gonna get the next chapter out, but I'll try my best to make it soon! although I have more exams next week for my summer classes, so there might be a bit of a delay. we'll find out!

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)!

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I don't respond to most but I read them all and they really make my day <333

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# frayed pieces of the self

## Chapter Summary

Tensions are rising, Wilbur and Tommy get called in for a secret meeting with some unexpected people.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi everyone i need to do physics homework bc it's due in like an hour so these will be fast but HI yes there's more of this it's a very fun chapter!! tysm for the love and support as always, hope you guys enjoy this one <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy and Technoblade were getting along well.

Too well, if you asked Wilbur.

It was the day after Wilbur's humiliating moment during the meeting, and Philza had announced that there wasn't going to be another negotiations meeting that day because it seemed like everyone 'needed a break.' That was bullshit. It was because of Wilbur that they weren't having another meeting yet, since they thought he was too fragile. That he was going to shatter if anymore pressure was put on him. It was humiliating, but Wilbur had done this to himself, so he had to live with the consequences.

Without anything to do that day, Tommy had once again brought up going to train with Technoblade. This time, Wilbur decided to join them, mostly because he wanted to see what kind of things his little brother was talking about with the Emperor in these sessions.

The training proceeded much like it had the first time. Tommy and Technoblade were sparring, while Wilbur had been paired with Ranboo. Already, Wilbur could see that Tommy's form had improved from the first session. His lunges were quick and decisive, and his moves were confident. He held the dagger like an extension of himself, and despite the fact that Technoblade was clearly going easy on him, Wilbur could still see beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"Prince Orpheus? Are you listening?"

Wilbur blinked, turning away from watching Tommy and Technoblade to see Ranboo standing across from him, looking concerned.

“Uh, sorry, what were you telling me?” Wilbur asked, belatedly realizing he had tuned out most of Ranboo’s lesson.

“I was saying that you need to focus on not forgetting where the dagger is at all times,” Ranboo told him, shooting a pointed look at the dagger resting in Wilbur’s right hand, which sat limply at his side. “Techno always says that the most important thing to remember when fighting with any kind of blade, especially small ones, is to never lose focus on them. Both yours and the person you’re fighting.”

“That’s how you get stabbed,” Technoblade suddenly cut in, and Wilbur glanced over to see he had both his own and Tommy’s daggers in his hands. “Don’t get distracted with the things around you. Your main focus has always gotta be on the weapons.”

Tommy, who looked as though he was pouting, made a quick grab to try and grab his dagger away from Technoblade. The Emperor pulled it back at the last second, holding it above his head and grinning down at Tommy. “Not fast enough, kid.”

“Fuck you, give me my knife back!” Tommy shouted, hopping up and down to try and reach the dagger even though it was well out of his reach.

“Figure out how to get it from me.”

Tommy stopped jumping, folding his arms over his chest as he glared up at Technoblade. Wilbur could practically hear the gears turning in Tommy’s head as his eyes scanned up and down Technoblade’s imposing frame.

Then, without warning, Tommy elbowed Technoblade right in the gut.

With a pained grunt, Technoblade crumpled over his middle, and Tommy cheered as he snatched his dagger out of the man’s hands. A grin had split his face, while Wilbur felt like a vice of panic was wrapped around his chest. Because Tommy had just *hit* the Emperor of the Antarctic Empire. The man who had held a knife to Wilbur’s throat and promised he could kill him if he wanted. One of the only two people responsible for keeping Wilbur and Tommy both alive right now.

Wilbur couldn’t breathe. He waited, dread settling itself across his shoulders. Technoblade was still catching his breath, and Tommy seemed clueless to the faux pas he’d just committed. He was bouncing around the mat, twirling his dagger in his hand without a care in the world.

Slowly, Technoblade straightened up. His golden gaze fixed on Tommy, and Wilbur was frozen in place as the invisible guillotine above his head made itself known again.

Then,

“Y’know, that’s not exactly what I meant, but I suppose that works too.”

And with that, Technoblade cracked a smile. He reached a hand out and ruffled Tommy’s hair, making his curls stick all over the place even more than they already did.

...what the fuck?

That wasn't right. Tommy had hit Technoblade without warning. Not even while they were officially training, just elbowed him right in the gut as hard as he could. And Technoblade didn't seem to care. If anything he almost seemed-

Wilbur's breathing hitched as he recognized the look glinting in Technoblade's eyes.

Pride. He was proud of Tommy.

This didn't make sense. Technoblade didn't care about Tommy. He didn't care about either of them. The man had made that perfectly clear by now. So for him to be *proud* of Tommy, especially for hitting him? It wasn't right.

Was Technoblade trying to gain Tommy's trust? Did he think that if he acted nice, Tommy would just hand over Eldingvegr without any struggle? It was such a strong departure from how both he and Philza had been trying to intimidate Wilbur and Tommy only a few weeks earlier. A change in attitude as sharp as that surely wasn't something he and Philza thought would work, right?

Wilbur's eyes flickered back to Tommy. His little brother, who was smiling wider than Wilbur had seen him smile in weeks. Who was bouncing up and down with excitement as he settled back into a fighting stance. Who didn't seem afraid in the slightest when Technoblade lunged at him again, blade in hand.

*Fuck.*

"Prince Orpheus?" Ranboo's worried voice called out beside him once again. "Are you okay?"

Without saying a word, Wilbur turned on his heel, and stormed out of the training room.



Nearly two hours passed before Tommy came back from training.

Wilbur had practically worn a rut into the floor with how much he'd been pacing. His nerves were on fire, his thoughts shooting through his mind like a meteor shower of worry. He couldn't sit still, and he couldn't make sense of what was happening.

Everything was slipping out of his control. Control of the negotiations, control of the way the others perceived him and Tommy, control of...

Control of himself. He was losing control of his own emotions, and it was becoming blatantly obvious.

By the time the doors slid open and a sweat-covered Tommy walked in, Wilbur had worked himself into an anxiety spiral. He sat on the edge of the bed, fingers twisting in his hair and leg bouncing up and down fast enough that he had long since lost feeling in it. His heart was



pounding so loudly in his ears that he didn't notice Tommy until his little brother was right in front of him.

"Wil? Are you okay?"

Tommy's voice cut through his racing thoughts, and Wilbur glanced up from his lap to see a bright pair of worried eyes meeting his own. Shit. He couldn't let Tommy see him like this.

"I- I'm fine," he lied, forcing himself to let go of his hair. His scalp ached from how hard he'd been tugging at the strands, and he focused on the stinging, hoping it would help slow his thundering heart.

"Are you sure? You left training early and Ranboo said you weren't feeling well. Is everything alright?" Tommy asked, still frowning at him.

Well, thank fuck for Ranboo. Wilbur hadn't given him any sort of explanation as to why he left, and he was fully expecting the boy to just tell Tommy and Technoblade that. But he had covered for Wilbur. That was... kind.

"It's alright. Just felt a bit faint," Wilbur told him, rubbing at his eyes. The glasses he'd gotten from the palace doctor to replace the ones he'd lost on Eldingvegr sat on his lap, and he tossed them into the pillows behind him so he didn't accidentally sit on them.

"Wilbur," Tommy said in a flat voice, "I'm not a fucking idiot. I can tell when you're lying."

Dammit. He really hated that Tommy knew all of his tells.

Before he could figure out what to say to that, Tommy was reaching out, grabbing Wilbur's hand and squeezing his fingers with surprising strength. "Come on. I know shit's bothering you. You've been acting off for days now."

"It's just the stress of everything," Wilbur lied, keeping his eyes on his lap.

Tommy scoffed. "No, it's not." Then, he was crouching down so that even though Wilbur was sitting and he was standing, they were face to face. "Seriously, why won't you talk to me? I know something's wrong. I'm not blind."

What was Wilbur supposed to say? That he felt like they were running out of options? That he was failing at his one job and the pain of that was worse than getting stabbed in the chest? That he didn't know if he could even trust himself anymore?

No, he couldn't tell Tommy any of that. He was supposed to be the one in control. He was supposed to be the one who knew what they were doing. If he told Tommy what was in his head right then, he wouldn't trust Wilbur anymore because he'd realize just how truly out of his depth he was. And if Tommy didn't have faith in him... Wilbur didn't have anything.

He had to deflect. To say something that would get Tommy to stop hounding Wilbur for answers he couldn't give.

“Since when have you been so close with Technoblade?” Wilbur asked, yanking his hand out of Tommy’s grasp.

He lifted his head, meeting Tommy’s eyes with the hardest glare he could muster. Immediately, Tommy’s eyes narrowed, and he took a step back from the bed.

“The fuck does that have to do with anything?” Tommy asked, voice pitching up.

“I was watching you two today at training,” Wilbur told him, standing up from the bed. “You literally elbowed him in the fucking gut, and I was *terrified* about what he was going to do to you as punishment. But then he didn’t get mad, and I was left wondering when that became something you could just do to the Imperator of the goddamn Antarctic Empire.”

“We- We’re not close!” Tommy argued, his frown deepening. “When we’re training it’s just different. I can mess with him a bit more and he’s fine with it. But that doesn’t mean we’re friends or anything.”

“Really? Because it sure doesn’t look that way to me,” Wilbur challenged, taking a step towards Tommy. “Don’t you see? He’s getting in your head, Tommy. Making you think that you can trust him when you absolutely can’t.”

Tommy folded his arms over his chest. “He’s not getting in my head.”

“Are you sure? You two look like great fucking friends to me,” Wilbur snapped.

“And what’s the problem with that?” Tommy questioned, dropping his arms to his sides. “Shouldn’t we be trying to be on good terms with the people we’re negotiating with?”

“Not when the other side has made it blatantly obvious they don’t give a single shit about us,” Wilbur explained, the vitriol dripping from his words. “Technoblade doesn’t actually like you, Tommy. He only cares about blaziphane. That’s all any of them care about!”

“You don’t know that!” Tommy hissed, baring his teeth at Wilbur now. “Do you not see how insane you’re acting? You’re so fucking paranoid all the time now!”

“I think I have every reason to be paranoid considering our situation,” Wilbur defended, glaring at Tommy. “In case you forgot, I’m trying to keep us both alive.”

“Is that why you went and got drunk last night? Was that another way you were keeping us alive?” Tommy challenged, raising an eyebrow at him.

At this, Wilbur faltered. Because he’d forgotten to tell Tommy about his meeting with Schlatt. By the time their conversation had ended, it was time for dinner, so Wilbur had gone straight to the dining hall. He found Tommy waiting for him, and since he didn’t want to discuss the meeting in a public space like that, he’d lied and told Tommy he’d been at the library. Then, when they got back to their room, Wilbur had been so tired from the turmoil of the day that he’d passed out before Tommy had even gotten out of the shower.

He definitely hadn’t been drunk though. Wilbur hadn’t had enough vodka to feel anything more than a warm buzz.

“I wasn’t drunk! What are you talking about?”

“I smelled the liquor on your breath during dinner, dipshit,” Tommy said, narrowing his eyes. Shit.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Wilbur let out a deep sigh. “I didn’t get drunk. While you were training with Technoblade, Schlatt invited me over to his room and we shared a drink. Singular.”

“You- You met with Schlatt? And you didn’t fucking tell me?!”

Wilbur shook his head. “I wasn’t trying to hide it from you, but I didn’t want to talk about it in public during dinner. Then when we got back to the room I was just so exhausted-”

“Why didn’t you tell me this morning then?” Tommy asked.

“It just slipped my mind!” Wilbur tried to explain, even though he was well-aware of how weak that excuse was. “Nothing major even happened. We just chatted a bit about how Mantle joined the Antarctic Empire.”

Tommy scoffed. “Okay, yeah, not major my ass.” Huffing, Tommy sat down on the edge of the bed, glaring so fiercely at the floor that Wilbur was sure he could burn a hole in it. “Tell me what he told you. I want to know.”

Dragging his fingers through his hair, Wilbur let out another sigh. “He just... He told me how Mantle wasn’t taken over by the Empire. They outright asked to join.”

At this, Tommy’s head snapped up. “What?”

“According to Schlatt, the Empire offered a lot of benefits for Mantle. Protection, more access to food, things like that,” Wilbur explained, leaning against the wall. “He was trying to frame us joining the Empire as a good thing. Like we wouldn’t be losing all our power over our planet.”

Tommy was quiet for a moment at that. His glare softened, and he twisted his fingers in his lap, like he had something he wanted to say, but wasn’t sure how to word it.

Wilbur waited, watching the way Tommy hunched in on himself. As if he was nervous.

Then, right as Tommy opened his mouth to say whatever was on his mind, there was a sharp knock at the door.

The two brothers shared a frown as they glanced at the door. It wasn’t time for dinner, so why would someone be knocking?

Both boys made their way to the door, wearing identical looks of confusion. Clearly, Tommy had no better idea of who this could be than Wilbur did.

Tommy tapped the panel to open the door. Wilbur stiffened when he saw who was on the other side.

It was Puffy. Not Jack, who they would both expect if they were being called in for another talk with Philza or something of the sort. No, this was the Captain of the Royal Guard, meaning this was something else.

“Hi boys, I hope I’m not disturbing you,” Puffy said, giving both of them a small smile.

“Uh, no, not at all,” Wilbur reassured her, extremely glad that the walls here were great at blocking out noise. The last thing he needed was for someone like Puffy to overhear his and Tommy’s argument. “Is there something going on?”

“You’ve received a summons,” Puffy explained, folding her hands in front of her.

Tommy frowned. “From the Emperor?”

She shook her head. “No, actually. This is from someone else who wants to meet with you.” At this, she paused, glancing up and down the hall before leaning in and lowering her voice. “They’d rather this stay discreet, which is why I’ve been sent to collect you and not Jack.”

“Are you gonna tell us who it is?” Tommy pushed, his frown deepening.

“You’ll see,” Puffy promised, as if that wasn’t the most ominous and terrifying way she could’ve phrased it.

Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and took a few steps down the hall. When neither of them followed her, she paused and looked back at them over her shoulder. “Are you coming or what?”

Although the whole situation was weird as fuck, it seemed like Puffy wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Besides, Wilbur’s curiosity had been more than piqued, and he was desperate to know who would want to talk to them under such discreet terms.

So after a few beats of hesitation, Wilbur sighed and stepped out of the room. Although Tommy seemed reluctant, he followed after another moment, and the door hissed as it slid shut behind them.

Puffy led them down a different part of the palace Wilbur hadn’t seen before. Although it was the middle of the day and there was plenty of light in the halls, for some reason it felt like they were sneaking through the shadows. Puffy’s steps were light, and she checked each hallway before allowing them to follow her past the turn. There was no one else in the halls besides the three of them though, and it wasn’t long before Puffy stopped in front of a completely unremarkable door.

She didn’t bother knocking. With one tap on the control panel, the door slid open, and Puffy gestured for the two of them to go inside.

This was strange. But despite how unusual the whole thing was, Wilbur wasn’t worried for their safety. Philza and Technoblade clearly trusted Puffy with far more than they let on.

Neither one of them wanted Tommy and Wilbur dead, so Puffy wasn't going to kill them either. Besides, if they had changed their minds about that, there would be no need for all the secrecy.

So after sharing one more worried look, the brothers stepped inside, with Puffy following behind.

The room reminded Wilbur of Philza's negotiations room, albeit far smaller and less elaborate. There was a plain table dominating most of the space, littered with holo-maps and some cups of water. Several chairs were settled around the one table, and when Wilbur saw who was sitting in the chairs, understanding dawned on him.

It was the Badlands. Sam sat at the head of the table, with Ponk on one side of him and Bad on the other. Skeppy was seated beside Bad, Antfrost next to Ponk, and Seapeekay beside Antfrost.

Six pairs of eyes fell on Wilbur and Tommy, and Wilbur forced himself to stand up straighter.

"That was fast," Sam commented, his dark eyes flickering to Puffy.

"They were already in their room," Puffy shrugged, walking past the two of them and sitting at the other end of the table. "And before you ask, no, no one saw us."

Sam dipped his head at her. "Thank you. We appreciate the help." Then, he looked back at the two of them, and gestured to the table. "You two can sit down, if you want."

Narrowing his eyes, Wilbur stopped Tommy from taking a step towards the table. "I think I'd like to know what we're doing here first."

"You're here to talk with us, of course!" Bad exclaimed, leaning back in his seat. "Did Puffy not-"

"I told Puffy not to tell them anything. I wanted to keep things as lowkey as we could," Sam cut him off. Then, he met Wilbur's eyes again. "Sorry for all the cloak and dagger, by the way. We wanted to have a chance to talk to you without all the... pressure, of the others being around."

"You mean without Philza or Technoblade around," Wilbur pointed out. "They don't know about this meeting."

It wasn't a question, but Sam nodded anyway. "No, they don't."

Holy shit. This... This could be their chance. The opportunity to get the upper hand Wilbur had been so desperately searching for. The Badlands were the only ones with the power to sway Philza's hand on decisions since they were allies and not part of the Empire itself.

Wilbur couldn't afford to fuck this up.

"Tommy," Wilbur whispered, leaning down to his brother's ear, "remember what we talked about the day before the summit began?"

Tommy seemed confused for a moment, before his eyes lit up in understanding. Wilbur gave him a pointed look, and he nodded, knowing exactly what Wilbur was referring to.

Wilbur gave him a small smile. Then, he smoothed his face out and turned back to the Council. Tommy did the same, and the two made their way to the table, settling in the empty chairs next to Skeppy and Bad.

A tense silence hung over the table for a few moments as they all exchanged wary looks. It was as if there was a stormcloud sitting above their heads, and they were all waiting for the first clap of thunder to ring out.

One beat.

Then another.

“So,” Bad began, clapping his hands together and making Wilbur jump in his seat, “we want to know how you two are feeling about the negotiations so far.”

Wilbur glanced at Tommy, silently nudging him to go first. Because even if this wasn’t a formal meeting, they were still meeting with political leaders, and thus it was Tommy’s role to speak first.

“Uh-” Tommy hesitated, eyes darting between Wilbur and the rest of the table. He took a breath to steady himself, and when his gaze fell on Wilbur again, he gave him a reassuring nod.

A moment passed. Tommy straightened in his seat.

“Honestly, it’s been really frustrating,” Tommy admitted, his voice lacking its usual abrasiveness. “Obviously my brother and I are both exhausted from what we’ve been through, and like Orpheus pointed out yesterday, constantly getting threatened really isn’t helping us feel better.”

“And that’s totally understandable,” Antfrost said. “You also don’t seem very fond of the idea of joining the Empire.”

Tommy looked like he was going to scoff for a moment, but stopped himself just before he could. Wilbur watched as he slumped his shoulders, eyes downcast as he nodded slowly. “Obviously we get why the Empire wants Eldingvegr, but it’s just... hard, I guess. When this is being framed as a negotiation, we’re not really being given any alternatives.”

“I’ll be honest, Phil hasn’t been very fair to you in a lot of those talks,” Ponk chimed in, folding their hands in front of them. “But you’re also in a pretty bad situation, so you don’t have a lot of negotiating weight to throw around.”

“Can I ask you something, Prince Theseus?” Seapeekay suddenly said, straightening up in his seat. Tommy nodded, and the man’s fox ears twitched. “I’ve been wondering this for a while now, but why are you so resistant to joining the Empire?”

Although Tommy's brows furrowed, he didn't look angry, and Wilbur breathed a small sigh of relief. "We don't want to lose control of our planet. I'm sure you guys can understand that."

"But Philza doesn't operate like Dream. You won't be losing full control of your planet, you'll just mostly have some guidelines to follow," Seapeekay pointed out.

"Philza wants control of the blaziphane trade," Tommy shot back, his voice starting to rise just the tiniest bit. "Even if he's hands off on everything else, our entire source of income is going to be in his hands."

"Phil isn't an idiot," Skeppy said, resting his elbows on the table. "He's not gonna pull a Dream and try to control the whole galaxy by restricting blaziphane access. He knows that'll just piss more people off than it's worth."

Tommy clenched his jaw, and Wilbur reached out under the table, resting a hand on his arm. Slowly, Tommy released a breath through his nose, the tension in his shoulders leaking out with the passing seconds.

"First off, even though everyone keeps telling us that, we really have no reason to trust that," Tommy began, choosing his words with the care of stepping through a minefield. "And second off, Eldingvegr is ours. We've been mining blaziphane for centuries, and we know the proper ways to do it. You have to be careful about how much you take at a time and from which mines, so I'm worried that under someone else's control, that stuff's gonna be ignored. My family has been in charge of the blaziphane trade for hundreds and hundreds of years. It's *my* planet. My home. I don't want someone else telling me what to do with it."

With the end of Tommy's speech, a heavy silence once again hung over the group. Wilbur was struggling to keep the shock off his face, because Tommy had done that *perfectly*. He had been firm, but not aggressive. His voice was soft and the worry on his face would elicit the exact kind of sympathy they wanted. The words he spoke were the measured words of a leader. Not an inexperienced child, but a to-be King.

Wilbur glanced around the table, expecting to see sympathy flashing across the other's faces. And for Sam and Ponk, this was true. Both of them had their brows furrowed, and although their mouths were hidden by their metal masks, Wilbur was sure their full faces would show deep concern for the brothers.

But as far as the other councillors went... it wasn't the same.

"Look, we understand that, Prince Theseus. But you can't really do that anymore," Bad said, not sounding the slightest bit moved by Tommy's words. "You've already lost the planet. It's not yours anymore. And while the Empire, and the Badlands as well, can definitely fight off Essempi for you, we're going to need something in return for it."

Wilbur frowned at Bad, although he was more focused on Tommy than Wilbur at that moment. Ranboo had said that Bad was nice, but although his tone was gentle, there was nothing nice about his words.

“But we can work out trade deals-”

“Which we’ll already get when Phil inducts you into the Empire,” Bad explained, cutting Tommy off.

Falling quiet, Tommy’s confidence from earlier withered away as he shrunk back into his seat. He glanced over to Wilbur, again silently asking for help, but Wilbur... wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t even sure if he should say anything. Because he had already screwed things up so many times now, it was as if he didn’t trust what words would come out of his mouth.

“We know this is upsetting for both of you,” Ponk jumped in, saving Wilbur the struggle of trying to figure out what the fuck to say in response to Bad. “But joining the Empire really isn’t as bad as you’re making it out to be. Philza isn’t stupid. He knows that you two are going to have a better idea of how to rule Eldingvegr than he would, and he’ll take that into account before making any huge decisions.”

“You can’t promise us that,” Wilbur suddenly said, making all eyes in the room turn to him. “That’s what everyone keeps telling us, but you could be lying. Or even if you aren’t, just because Philza has done that with the other planets he’s taken over doesn’t mean he’ll do that with Eldingvegr. Because we all know Eldingvegr isn’t like any of his other conquests. There’s far more at stake here.”

At the head of the table, Sam let out a soft sigh, although it sounded more like a hiss coming from his gas mask. The others at the table turned their gazes to him, and Wilbur waited for him to say something.

“I mean... I don’t think it’s too ridiculous to consider an alliance instead of a full takeover,” Sam murmured, eyes fixed on the table in front of him.

Wilbur’s eyes widened, and Tommy perked up beside him. This was it. This was what they needed. Sam was starting to see their side of things.

At this, Bad scoffed. “Oh, come on, Sam! The situation is too different, we know that. There’s too many other factors for Phil to do anything but a full takeover.”

“Yeah, Bad’s right. It’s too risky,” Skeppy agreed.

“But-”

“Sam,” Ponk said quietly, giving him a pointed look, “enough.”

And just like that, Sam crumbled right in front of them. He gave the brothers an apologetic look before slumping down in his seat, nodding silently as he folded his hands in his lap.

Just like that, Wilbur’s hope had died almost as quickly as it was lit.

It was at this point that Wilbur remembered Puffy was still in the room. She sat at the opposite end of the table from Sam, her grey-green eyes darting around the table at the different occupants. Her expression was unreadable, and Wilbur wondered why she was there



in the first place. He supposed it could be to ensure his and Tommy's safety, although he wasn't sure what threat the Badlands posed to them.

Or maybe she was just there to watch. For some reason, Wilbur was more unsettled by that possibility than anything else.

"Look, the long story short is you don't need to be afraid of joining the Empire," Seapeekay suddenly said, drawing everyone's attention to him. "You don't really have a lot of other options at this point, but it won't be that bad either way."

"Oh for fuck's sake, cut the bullshit!"

Tommy's harsh words sliced through the air like a razorblade, his voice sharp and anger simmering behind his eyes. Wilbur snapped his head towards him, shocked at the drastic shift from how composed he was before.

"Language!" Bad scolded, his glowing eyes narrowing at Tommy.

Scoffing, Tommy leaned back in his seat, stretching his arms above his head. "Yeah, okay, don't care. Anyway, we don't need your stupid platitudes that everything's gonna be okay or whatever the fuck. You don't need to pretend to give a shit about us when we both know all you guys want is blaziphane."

"That's not true," Sam protested.

Skeppy, meanwhile, let out a barking laugh. "Nah, the kid's right. Of course we only care about blaziphane, because why would we focus on anything else?" Absently, he tapped at some of the blue crystals growing out of his cheeks, and Wilbur realized this was the most he'd ever heard Skeppy say at any meeting so far. "Like, no offense to either of you, but the way to guarantee us getting the best prices on blaziphane right now is by letting Phil take you guys over. So that's what we're all pushing for."

"So was this meeting just your guys' attempt at trying to get us to agree to joining the Empire?" Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sam was silent as Ponk, Seapeekay, and Antfrost shared uncomfortable looks. Meanwhile, Bad and Skeppy seemed as relaxed as could be, with Bad shrugging when Wilbur caught his eye.

"Fine. If that's the case, I think we're done here," Wilbur snapped, anger flaring inside of him as he pushed up from the chair.

"Yeah, we're done," Tommy echoed, pressing against Wilbur's side as soon as he was standing. "Captain, can you take us back to our room?"

Puffy, whose eyes had gone wide with the argument, quickly nodded as she hurried to her feet. "Uh, yes. I'll escort you back straight away."

With that, Puffy led the way out of the meeting room. The Council didn't say anything as they left, but Wilbur could feel the weight of their gazes on his back.

He didn't look back.

No words were exchanged as Puffy escorted them back to their room. Once she had gone, they only had a few minutes to themselves before Jack arrived to take them to dinner. Admittedly, the distraction was a welcome one. Because it wasn't as if there was much to say in the wake of the meeting.

It was a failure. The Badlands had been their last hope for changing Philza's mind, but they didn't care. No one was on their side.

Jack seemed to notice the heaviness in the air between Wilbur and Tommy as he walked them to the dining hall, shooting questioning glances at Wilbur every so often. Wilbur didn't offer an explanation, and neither did Tommy.

During dinner, Tommy seemed to be making an effort to appear normal in front of Aimsey and Ranboo. He was a little stiff at first, but quickly relaxed as he talked with his friends, laughing at Aimsey's stories and nudging Ranboo's side.

Wilbur tried to join in, but found himself staying quiet for almost the entire meal. He picked at his food, only managing to stomach a few bites before nausea twisted his gut. In his mind, he kept replaying the conversation with the Badlands. The way Bad had casually brushed off Tommy's impassioned speech, or how Sam was immediately shut down when he tried to suggest an alternative to a full takeover. The meeting was useless. Wilbur and Tommy had lost the support of the Badlands long before they stepped into that room. Wilbur just wasn't sure when.

At one point during the meal, Wilbur was startled out of his thoughts by movement in the corner of his eye. He glanced to his right, noticing Ranboo whispering something into Tommy's ear. He didn't miss the way Tommy's eyes widened at whatever Ranboo said, and he also didn't miss the way Ranboo's own gaze was nervously darting around like he was worried someone might overhear.

Of course, this begged the question of what Ranboo told Tommy. Wilbur knew that if it was anything secretive, Tommy most likely wouldn't tell him until they were alone. So he shoved down the curiosity burning inside of him, forcing himself to eat a few more bites of his food before calling it quits and waiting for Tommy to finish his meal so they could go back to their room.

His fingers danced against the table in a nervous rhythm as he waited. The lingering adrenaline from the meeting had left him shaky, and Wilbur found himself twisting his napkin in his lap just to have something to do with his hands. He tried focusing on the conversation Tommy was having, but Aimsey and Ranboo's voices just simply weren't being processed in his mind. There were too many other things he was thinking about. Too much already crowding the walls of his skull.

When the meal finally ended and Jack escorted them back to their room, the first thing Wilbur did when the door had shut behind them was whirl around on Tommy.

"What did Ranboo say to you at dinner?"

Tommy blinked, frozen with his coat only half off. “What?”

“During dinner Ranboo whispered in your ear at one point. What did he say?” Wilbur pressed, leaning against the door.

Narrowing his eyes, Tommy slowly tugged his coat the rest of the way off, and tossed it on the bed behind him. “What does it matter?”

What *did* it matter? Truthfully, Wilbur wasn’t sure. Because he trusted Tommy. Of course he trusted Tommy. If Ranboo told Tommy anything important that Wilbur should know, Tommy would tell him. Wilbur knew he would.

...right?

“Can you just tell me? You had a weird look on your face after he said it and I got worried,” he explained, although that was partially a lie. Wilbur wasn’t worried for Tommy. He was worried about the fact that Tommy seemed reluctant to tell him.

“Wil, why the fuck are you acting like this?” Tommy asked, his frown deepening. “What, do you think Ranboo whispered some huge government secret to me over dinner and now I’m just choosing not to tell you?”

Wilbur flushed at the accusation, and adamantly shook his head. “No, of course not. I’m just-” his breathing hitched, and he wrapped his arms around himself. “I don’t know. I’m just on edge, I guess.”

Tommy stared at him for a moment, face shifting between something angry, to something more verging on the precipice of concern. His frown softened, and he walked over to Wilbur, reaching out to tug on his arms so he wasn’t folded over on himself.

“Look, today was shit. The Badlands are fucking pricks, but so is everyone else in the palace pretty much. It’s nothing we haven’t dealt with already,” Tommy reminded him, gently squeezing his wrists.

Well, Tommy had a fair point there. Yes, this was a bad blow, but it was practically the hundredth bad blow they’d gotten ever since Wilbur woke up to the sound of explosions back on Eldingvegr. Losing his head over this wasn’t going to do anything.

Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur nodded at Tommy’s words. “Okay. Yeah, you’re right. We’ll deal with it.”

“We will,” Tommy agreed, squeezing one last time before dropping his hands. “But not tonight, because I’m fucking exhausted.”

Wilbur huffed. “Yeah, that’s fair. I am too.”

“Then I call the shower first,” Tommy said, flashing Wilbur a sharp grin as his eyes flickered towards the bathroom.

Sighing, Wilbur slumped further against the wall. “Go for it, man.”

Letting out a cheer, Tommy ran for the bathroom, but he paused midstep.

“Oh, by the way, it was a dick joke,” Tommy said, leaning on the door frame.

“What was?”

“The thing Ranboo whispered in my ear. He told me a dick joke and I was trying not to laugh.”

*Oh.*

Dragging his hands down his face, Wilbur slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. He was silent for a few beats, before asking, “Was it a good one?”

Another smile. “It was really fucking funny.”

Then, Tommy disappeared into the bathroom, the door hissing as it slid shut behind him. And Wilbur was left alone on the floor of his bedroom, one part of him wondering when his paranoia had gotten so bad.

The other part of him wondered if he actually believed Tommy. And no matter how hard he tried to ignore it, the question lingered in his head for the rest of the night.

Nearly two hours later, Wilbur found himself staring at the ceiling of the dark bedroom once again. As always, Tommy was fast asleep beside him, and Wilbur’s head was far too loud for sleep to find him.

He wondered if he went to the library out of habit, or if he led himself there because some subconscious part of his mind knew exactly what he’d find there. Or rather, *who* would find *him*.

The library was empty when he got there. The glowing holo-pad was dim compared to the shadows that surrounded him, and Wilbur found himself searching for texts on the Badlands. He was well-aware it wasn’t going to help much at this point, but he didn’t know what else to do. There were no next steps to take, so he did one of the only things he knew how. Study.

*Out of the three moons, Decima is the most distinctive from its two sisters. The surface is harsh—volcanoes littering the terrain that spew out constant torrents of molten lava. Down on the surface, temperatures are far too high for even extremophiles to survive in. But in the upper atmosphere, things are far more pleasant. Temperatures drop, the air is clean of toxins, but the atmosphere still provides adequate protection from solar radiation.*

*The floating cities of Decima are said to be some of the greatest feats of engineering in the past thousand years. Kept afloat by the boiling temperatures on the surface of the planet, the cities are all thriving metropolises—each with hundreds of thousands of citizens going about rather average daily lives despite their unique living conditions.*

*One major drawback that comes with life in the floating cities though is mostly seen when Decima natives travel to other planets. With lungs that have adjusted to breathe the very thin air of the upper atmosphere, Decima natives often struggle to breathe on the surface of more*

*typical planets. That is why it is standard for every Decima native to wear specialized masks when traveling off planet, that converts the atmosphere they breathe into-*

“I had a feeling I’d find you here.”

Snapping his head up from the holo-pad, Wilbur knew he should’ve felt afraid when he found himself meeting Philza’s icy gaze across the library. But... he was too exhausted to be afraid anymore. The water lapping at his sides was eroding away every last piece of him, and he didn’t have the energy to do anything about it.

So instead of offering his typical polite greeting, Wilbur instead set the holo-pad down, and leaned back in his seat. “I take it you were searching for me then?”

Philza hummed, his wings rustling as he walked over to the chair Wilbur was sitting in. Once again, he didn’t sit beside him. Instead, he stayed standing, pale strands of hair falling over his face as he looked down at Wilbur.

“I guess you could say that,” Philza said, leaning back against the desk. “I was curious to see how you were doing after your... episode, at the meeting yesterday.”

Wilbur grit his teeth at the reminder. “I’m fine. I just got caught up for a moment.”

“Are you sure?” Philza pushed, his cold eyes sending chills down Wilbur’s spine. “Because that seemed like something that had been building for a while, mate.”

The weight of Philza’s judgement was like maggots wriggling under his skin. He hated how Philza could see straight through every single thing he did. He hated the way he seemed to be able to read Wilbur’s mind. He hated how powerless he felt in the face of the Emperor.

“Whatever you think you’re doing, it’s not going to work,” Wilbur hissed, narrowing his eyes at Philza. “I know you don’t actually care about my wellbeing. I don’t trust you, and I never will.”

There was a beat of silence as Philza blinked at him, before a slow smile spread over his face.

“Good. You shouldn’t trust me,” Philza told him, his teeth glinting in the faint light. “But there is one thing I think you should keep in mind, especially regarding the other leaders.”

“What is it?”

Philza’s smile grew. “At least I’m honest about my intentions for you and your planet. I couldn’t say the same for the others.”

Wilbur thought back to the Badlands. How they pretended to care about him and Tommy, pretended to listen to their pleas and take what they wanted into consideration. But the truth was that they hadn’t cared at all. They simply wanted Wilbur and Tommy to think they cared, so they could convince them to give in.

But had Philza really been honest about his intentions so far? He openly admitted to wanting to take over Eldingvegr for blaziphane, that was true. At the same time though, there were so

many other aspects to the things he said and did that just... didn't make sense. The strange smiles and taunting words, the fact that he apparently saw 'potential' in Wilbur—when it came to those things, Wilbur couldn't even begin to guess his intentions.

"You really consider yourself to be more forthright than the others?" Wilbur asked, words edged with a razor.

"I do."

"Then answer me this," Wilbur said, his heart pounding in his ears. "Why me?"

Philza raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Wilbur clenched his jaw. "Ever since we got to Zephyrs IV, you've been fixated on me. Every taunt, every insult, every bullshit power play has been said to me. And I don't understand why because I'm not the one with the power to make the final decision." He paused, his breathing hitching. "I... I'm not *important*."

The last words were little more than a whisper, hanging in the air between them as the resulting silence draped itself over Wilbur's shoulders. Philza's head tilted to the side, once again reminding Wilbur of a bird.

Slowly, Philza's hand came up to cup the side of his face. Talons pressed into the soft tissue of his cheek, not breaking the skin, but coming close to it.

Wilbur was surprised at how warm Philza's hand was, especially when his eyes were like chips of ice.

"Oh, you are very important, Orpheus," Philza told him, and there was something in his voice that reminded Wilbur of a curled up snake just waiting to strike. "You might not be the heir, but that doesn't make you any less interesting to me."

Ignoring the way his stomach flipped at *you are very important*, Wilbur glared at Philza. "Why? What about me is so interesting to you?"

With a featherlight touch, a talon-tipped thumb brushed under Wilbur's eye. "Well, truthfully, you remind me of myself when I was your age."

It was like a bucket of ice water had just been dumped on his head. Wilbur wanted to rip his face away from Philza's touch, but with the man's talons so close to his eyes, he didn't dare move a muscle.

"I'm nothing like you," Wilbur snapped, words dripping with vitriol. "You know nothing about me."

Philza didn't seem deterred by his hostility. "But I do, Orpheus. I know what it's like to be wary of everything and everyone around you, convinced that they have no use for you outside of their own means. I know what it's like to feel completely lost inside yourself, because no one was ever there to tell you who you were supposed to be," he whispered, talon grazing his temple. "And I know what it's like to push down the rage sitting behind your ribs.

The anger you hold towards fate for dealing you such an unfair hand at life, because something deep inside of you knows you're supposed to be more than this, but no one else seems to think so."

The ache in Wilbur's chest was blinding in its pain. Because someone put it into words. The hurricane in his mind was made up of all those pieces, spinning and spinning without a direction to go.

Suddenly, Philza was leaning down so they were face to face. Wilbur noticed the glow of his freckles reflected off Philza's eyes, turning them an unnatural shade of blue.

"You're like a block of wet clay," Philza said, talons still digging into his cheek. "Unshaped and formless, without any kind of guidance. But I could carve you into something more. Something great."

Wilbur's heart thundered in his ears as he struggled to keep his breathing steady. The talons were digging into his skin, and with any more pressure, he was going to bleed.

"But what if I don't want to be molded by you?" Wilbur asked, defiance lacing his words.

Philza snorted, as if Wilbur's resistance was little more than something to laugh at.

"Oh Orpheus," Philza whispered, his grin sharp again, "the reason I'm an Emperor is because I know how to get what I want."

## Chapter End Notes

aaaaa fucking photons and equations ughhhhhhhh i dont like physics

ok ok i hope you guys enjoyed this one!! i know we've had a similar routine going for a few chapters now, but things are going to shift very soon i promise :) thank you for staying patient! and i hope you're liking the slow build up we're going with hehe

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

please let me know what you thought down in the comments!! even tho i don't respond to most i do read all of them and they really make my day <3

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# grains of sand in an hourglass

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur and Tommy have a disagreement, and both get a stark reminder that they don't have unlimited time.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone! sorry this took so long to update, but also I'm not really sorry because I do have a real life outside of this lol so yeah sometimes updates get delayed. but it was definitely more delayed than I intended it to be, so in exchange you guys get an extra long chapter! 11.6k words woohoo!

in case you're wondering how life is going for moi, I technically graduated uni but also I didn't bc I have to take summer classes to finish my degree. I finished the first set of summer classes and had finals, and now I'm onto the second (and last) set of classes! also my best friend just moved across the country and won't be back for at least 2 years, so I was spending a lot of time with her the last few weeks before she left, so that's another reason for my absence

anyway, I'm back now so hooray for that! this chapter was so fun to write, and I really hope you guys enjoy how long it is lol, definitely took a bit longer than usual for sure

TWs for this chapter: minor descriptions of derealization/dissociation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning after his encounter with Philza in the library, Wilbur felt... off.

His skin was too tight for his body. There was an itch deep inside of him he couldn't scratch. His blood was boiling and something had shifted deep inside his chest. It was like his body was a room, and while he slept every single piece of furniture had been shifted two centimeters to the left. Something was off, but it was impossible to tell exactly what.

Philza's words kept playing on repeat in his mind. Wilbur had thought that knowing his intentions would make things easier, would help him feel more in control of his position on Zephys IV. But asking that fateful question had done the exact opposite. Because Philza wanted him. Orpheus Wilbur Sóti.

The bastard prince.



The Queen's mistake.

*"I could carve you into something more. Something great."*

Carving. Using a blade to cut out a desired object from a solid material. Philza wanted to chisel away at him, to cut and cut and cut until he transformed Wilbur into... into what? A reflection of himself? A puppet he could use to control others?

Wilbur didn't know. All Philza had said was that he'd be something great.

But Wilbur wasn't meant for greatness. This was something he'd known since he was three years old, and had the name Sóti given to him by Tommy's father. A permanent reminder of what the King thought of him. A reminder that he wasn't supposed to be on Eldingvegr. He wasn't supposed to be anywhere.

It was a reminder that he shouldn't have been born.

Sticky eyes fluttered open at the sound of a loud crash. He bolted upright, heart leaping into his throat as explosions echoed in his ears, and memories sylfrwood trees set alight burned in his mind.

"Shit! I didn't mean to wake you!" Tommy squeaked out as soon as Wilbur met his gaze.

It took Wilbur a second to fully process what he was seeing. There was a table in the center of the bedroom that certainly hadn't been there before—a cart with wheels and a blue tablecloth on top. Several dishes covered with silver lids dotted the top of the table, steam curling out from underneath and filling the room with the wonderful smell of roasted meat and freshly baked bread.

In front of Tommy, one silver lid was discarded, laying upside down on the ground. There was one plate that was uncovered—the missing lid presumably being the one that had been dropped—and Wilbur saw that Tommy had been reaching for a plate full of breakfast food.

"Are they not holding breakfast in the dining hall today?" Wilbur muttered, blinking a few times as he tried to wake himself up.

"They are," Tommy told him, bending down to pick up the lid that had woken Wilbur. "But you were still sleeping, and I didn't wanna wake you up but I was really hungry. I figured we could just have the servants bring us breakfast today, so I called it in and it just got here a few minutes ago."

Letting out a breath of relief, Wilbur slumped over his own knees as his heartbeat slowed to a regular pace once more. "You could've just woken me, you know? I don't want to sleep the whole day away or anything."

Tommy shrugged, picking his plate up off the table and sitting on the end of the bed. "You haven't been sleeping well lately," he said, setting the plate on his lap before taking a bite of a bread roll.

Of course he noticed. Tommy noticed everything about Wilbur these days. All his failures, all his shortcomings. To Tommy, Wilbur was a sheet of glass. There was nothing he could hide from his little brother.

Wilbur shoved down the resentment curling around his gut at that realization.

“Why didn’t you just go to the dining hall on your own?” Wilbur asked, rubbing at his eyes.

Something nervous flashed over Tommy’s face, and he took a quick bite of his food to hide it. “Just didn’t feel like going without you.”

Even if Wilbur was more out of it than usual these days, he could still tell when Tommy was lying to him.

“Let’s try that again,” Wilbur said, his voice still rough with sleep. “Why didn’t you go to the dining hall without me?”

There was a beat of silence as Tommy stared at his food, like the strips of fried pteet were going to tell him what to say.

It was then the realization dawned on Wilbur. Why Tommy would be so nervous to even leave the room while Wilbur was sleeping. And the understanding that came with the realization was like something sharp piercing straight through his chest.

“Did you think I would be angry?” Wilbur asked after a minute passed, words far softer this time.

Was Tommy afraid of him now? Was that what was going on? Had the little brother who had never shied away from pushing Wilbur’s buttons afraid of upsetting him over something as small as going to breakfast without him?

To his surprise though, Tommy immediately shook his head. “What? No. That’s not it at all.”

Huh?

Wilbur frowned. “Then what is it?”

Sighing, Tommy moved the plate off his lap and turned to face Wilbur fully on the bed. “I just... I know that even though we’ve been here for a while now, if I woke up and you just weren’t in the room at all, it’d freak me the fuck out. At least for a few minutes.” He curled in on himself, eyes dropping to his lap. “I didn’t want you to get scared that something happened to me.”

*Oh.*

Somehow, that was worse than Tommy being afraid that Wilbur would be mad at him. It was a stark reminder that despite how they had both settled into their routines on Zephys IV, the night of the takeover still haunted both of them. Of course Wilbur knew this already. He knew it when he woke up to the sound of whimpers in the middle of the night and saw Tommy trapped in a nightmare, or when Wilbur himself had woken up hyperventilating, with

Tommy hugging him and whispering that it was okay over and over again until Wilbur was able to breathe again.

(According to Tommy, Wilbur had been talking in his sleep. Saying Tommy's name over and over, begging Dream not to hurt him. Wilbur had been immensely grateful he didn't remember the dream himself.)

Even if they were physically safe for now, neither one of them was free from that night on Eldingvegr. Wilbur hated whenever he was forced to remember that fact. Especially when it resulted in Tommy going out of his way to try and make sure Wilbur didn't get freaked out.

That wasn't Tommy's job. Wilbur needed to be doing that for Tommy, not the other way around.

"You shouldn't be worrying about that," Wilbur told him, bringing his knees up to his chest. "I can take care of myself."

"Are you saying that because you wouldn't have been freaked out, or because you still think I shouldn't be allowed to worry about my brother?" Tommy challenged, raising an eyebrow at him.

Wilbur swallowed down the lump in his throat. "I'm an adult, Tommy. I can handle my own shit."

"You're a fucking idiot, that's what you are," Tommy huffed, crawling across the bed so he was sitting right in front of Wilbur. "You're older than me, yeah, but that doesn't mean no one should worry about you."

"Tommy," Wilbur groaned, dragging his hands down his face. "I don't want *you* worrying about me. You're a kid. You shouldn't have to spend your time wondering if you can go to fucking breakfast or not because your older brother is still sleeping."

At this, Tommy's brows furrowed. "What is it then? Am I a kid who shouldn't have to worry, or am I an idiotic child who's going to get us killed because I don't know how to negotiate?"

Wilbur winced, having known deep down that that argument from so many weeks ago would come back to haunt him.

"Those are two different situations," he tried.

Tommy scoffed. "Yeah right. Tell me who to be then, Wilbur. Prince Theseus, the future king of Eldingvegr? Or Tommy, your stupid little brother who'll just listen to whatever the fuck you say? Because I can't seem to do anything right these days, and it's getting really goddamn frustrating."

As he spoke, Tommy's voice got louder and louder, and Wilbur shrunk back at the unexpected display of rage painting Tommy's face. He wasn't sure where this anger was stemming from, but it seemed like something that had just been sitting beneath the surface for quite a while now.

“I- Tommy, come on, that’s not what I’m trying to do here.”

“Then you need to fucking tell me what you’re trying to do!” Tommy exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. “I’m trying so goddamn hard to understand what you’re thinking, but you’re not talking to me anymore. You didn’t tell me that you spoke to Schlatt in private, you’re acting super fucking weird and paranoid, and last night you left while I was sleeping and didn’t come back for hours!”

Shit.

“You woke up?” Wilbur asked, flinching under Tommy’s angry glare.

“I did,” Tommy told him, clenching his jaw. “I woke up and freaked the fuck out because you weren’t there, and I sat there frozen for *ages* trying to think if I should go after you or not. I had no idea where you were, so I wasn’t sure if you would come back, or if you were literally about to be executed and I was just sitting in bed staring at the goddamn ceiling.” He took a shaky breath, some of his anger fading as the seconds ticked on and being replaced with something far heavier. “When you came back, I pretended to be asleep, just to see what you’d do. I thought you might... I dunno, try to wake me up. But you didn’t. You just went back to bed, and I figured you might tell me what happened in the morning. Instead, I’m getting a lecture on how I’m apparently stupid for giving a shit about my brother.”

This was bad. Wilbur hadn’t even considered telling Tommy what Philza said to him the night before. That felt like something that should be kept between him and the Emperor. He didn’t want that to hang over Tommy’s head. Not right now at least.

“I trust you with my life,” Tommy then whispered, all his sparks of anger having completely died out, leaving only hollow coldness behind. “But it’s getting hard when everyone around us is telling us to do the exact opposite of what you’re telling me. And it’s even harder when you’ve made it clear you don’t trust anyone anymore. Not even me.”

No. This- This wasn’t what Wilbur wanted. He had been trying to keep extra weight off of Tommy’s shoulders. Not make his little brother think he didn’t trust him anymore.

Guilt wrapped around his chest like a vice. Wilbur hunched over, wrapping his arms tight around his knees and burying his face in the blankets still draped over his legs. He took a few breaths, struggling to calm the maelstrom in his mind. The breathing exercises weren’t working. His thoughts were spinning too fast, and his heart was pounding even louder than the waves.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur forced out, doing everything he could to shove down the anxiety buzzing inside of him. “I trust you. Fuck, of course I trust you, Tommy.”

Was that true? Wilbur wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

“Then tell me where you went last night,” Tommy said, keeping his distance from Wilbur on the bed.

Air rattled through Wilbur's lungs as he forced another breath. The grip around his chest wasn't loosening, but he was able to breathe, and for now that was enough.

"I went to the library," he said, lifting his head from his knees to meet Tommy's eyes. "I couldn't sleep, so I figured if I read some books on the Badlands it'd tire me out."

From there, Wilbur proceeded to tell Tommy exactly what had happened with Philza. As much as it pained him to, he didn't leave any part out, even emphasizing Philza's threat towards him at the end of their conversation.

By the time he finished, Tommy had gone pale. He was silent for a few beats, eyes darting around the room like he was trying to look anywhere but at Wilbur's face. Internally, Wilbur's gut clenched, a looming sense of dread settling on his shoulders.

"That's fucking creepy," Tommy finally muttered.

Wilbur forced out a pained snort. "Yeah, you could say that again."

Tommy didn't crack a smile, and the effect was more unsettling than Wilbur thought it would be.

"I guess it makes sense since Philza always talked to you during our meetings," Tommy muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"It's probably just some new attempt at a power play or something," Wilbur tried to deflect.

There was another moment of quiet as Tommy considered this. Wilbur noticed he was twisting his fingers together in his lap, and in the past he might've reached out to grab Tommy's hand and squeeze it in silent reassurance. To tell him that everything was going to be okay.

Wilbur didn't do that this time.

"I'm gonna say something, and it's really gonna piss you off, but I think one of us needs to admit it," Tommy finally said, sounding far more serious than Wilbur had ever heard him before. He took another breath to steady himself, before lifting his eyes to meet Wilbur's head on. "I don't think there's a way for us to get out of joining the Empire."

For a moment, the words didn't register in Wilbur's head. Instead, Tommy's voice just echoed in his ears, repeating the sentence over and over as he struggled to wrap his mind around it.

Then, it hit him.

"What the fuck?!" Wilbur shouted, rage ballooning in his chest. "You're not- Tommy, come on, you're not saying what I think you're saying."

"And what if I am?" Tommy challenged, straightening his shoulders. "Wilbur, we need to wake the fuck up. Philza and Technoblade aren't willing to give us any leeway in the negotiations. The Badlands aren't gonna take our side of things. We have literally no power

here, and if we try to leave, Dream is going to hunt us down and kill us. I know you keep saying we can't join the Empire, but I think we need to start considering--"

"No!" Wilbur cut him off, pushing the blankets off his legs. "Are you saying you're just giving up? That you're totally fine with giving up our home to the fucking Antarctic Empire just like that?"

"Of course I'm not fine with it!" Tommy argued. "But the more I think about it, the more fucked we really are! And now hearing that Philza wants to mentor you or whatever only makes it worse, because that means he has even less reason to let us stay independent."

"It's not over," Wilbur hissed, lunging forward so he was right in Tommy's face. "This is what they want, don't you see? They want us to give up all hope. They want us to think we have no other choice. But we don't give in. That's how you win negotiations, Tommy. You keep the pressure *on*."

Tommy stared him down, a few tense seconds ticking by with agonizing slowness. Wilbur could feel his heart pounding in his ears. Tommy glared at him, icy flames dancing in his bright eyes. There were enough sparks inside of him to burn Wilbur if he wanted, and Wilbur knew he was standing far too close to get away in time if that happened.

Still, he stayed. And as the moments passed on, he watched the flames die down.

Then, after what felt like ages, Tommy scowled and looked away.

"I'm just saying we should think about it," Tommy muttered, wrapping his arms around himself.

"And I'm saying that's fucking stupid," Wilbur shot back, pushing off the bed to his feet. "We're not giving up."

*We can't let Philza win*, was the part that Wilbur didn't say out loud, but he still thought all the same. At this point, it felt as though he and Philza were playing one of the most complicated games of chess of all time. Philza was only a few moves away from being able to call checkmate, but he wasn't there yet. There was still time for Wilbur to figure out an alternate strategy.

Grabbing a bread roll off the table, Wilbur tossed a coat over his pajamas and stormed towards the door. "I'm going for a walk," he said, shooting Tommy a dark look as the doors slid open.

"You're not going to eat breakfast?" Tommy asked, his voice strangely flat as he gestured to the table.

Wilbur held up the roll. "You eat the rest. I'll be back later." Then, before Tommy could say anything else, Wilbur hurried into the hallway.

While Wilbur knew it probably wasn't the best to just storm out after a fight like that, he also knew he couldn't be around Tommy for a second longer. There was so much going on in his

head—rage dancing with frustration and grief bubbling up inside of him as he was once again hit with the realization that he was failing at his one job. It was too much for him to handle right now. If he hadn't left right when he did, he was going to say something he regretted, and he couldn't afford to put anymore strain on his and Tommy's relationship at the moment.

That was a surreal thought to have. Realizing that for the first time in their entire lives, he had to worry about pushing Tommy too far. In a lot of ways, Tommy was Wilbur's other half. After the death of their mother, the two had rarely been apart for more than a few hours at a time. As a baby, Tommy would cry if he and Wilbur were taken into separate rooms, and more often than not he wouldn't fall asleep unless Wilbur was holding his hand. When they got older, Tommy continued to follow Wilbur like a shadow, only leaving his side when his lessons called for it. And Wilbur had never minded.

While Niki was Wilbur's stability, Tommy was his lighthouse. He was the one Wilbur kept his sights on when he needed to remember why he did the things he did. He needed to become an advisor to help Tommy when he took the throne. He needed to protect Tommy when Dream was threatening his life. He needed to keep Eldingvegr away from the Empire so Tommy would have a planet to rule when he turned eighteen.

But now Tommy was saying they needed to consider giving Eldingvegr up. The exact opposite of what Wilbur had been trying to do this entire time. For once, they were truly at odds, and it made Wilbur feel sick to his stomach.

So lost in his own thoughts, Wilbur didn't even hear the voices echoing in the hall until he almost turned the corner, stopping himself at the last second.

"Karl, c'mon, tell me now. What's this meeting gonna be about?"

Wilbur recognized Tina's voice on the other side of the wall, and listened as her and presumably Karl's footsteps clicked in tandem with one another, the two of them moving further away from Wilbur's side of the hall.

"You're so impatient sometimes," Karl giggled. "You'll find out in a few minutes."

"But I wanna know nowwww," Tina whined, and Wilbur risked peeking around the corner to see the princess and the seer heading towards the meeting room.

Wilbur waited for them to get a fair enough distance away before he darted out from behind the corner, ducking into an alcove so he could keep listening to them talk. From what he could tell, there was another meeting about to start, and obviously he and Tommy hadn't been invited to it.

"I haven't even seen most of the meeting, Tina," Karl told her, his deep red cloak swishing around his calves with every step. "I only know what the end result is gonna be."

"Then tell me that! I wanted to sleep in so badly, but no, apparently having another secret meeting was too important to hold off till after lunch," Tina complained, slumping against Karl's side.

The doors to the meeting room were being held open. Wilbur ran out of his current alcove to duck into a closer one, wondering if he'd be able to eavesdrop like he had before. Admittedly, it was different this time given that it was the middle of the day and not late at night. But maybe Wilbur would get lucky for once in this miserable palace. Maybe no one would walk by his alcove, and he would be able to listen to the latest secrets Philza wanted to share with the other leaders so he could actually get an idea of what he was supposed to do next.

Right now, Wilbur needed a plan more than ever before. Tommy was losing faith in him, and Wilbur understood why. The bleakness of their situation was looming over him, and he knew there was only so much more stress the two of them could handle before they both snapped in two.

"Princess Tina," Puffy's voice suddenly cut in, making Wilbur jump. "Marquise Karl. You two are the last to arrive."

Tina sighed. "Our apologies, Captain."

"It's no worry. We've only been waiting for a few minutes," Puffy reassured her. "But please, hurry inside. His Majesty has important things to discuss."

Wilbur listened as Tina and Karl's footsteps faded into the room, with Puffy quickly following. Sitting up straighter, Wilbur tried to listen to what was going on inside the room itself, but was almost immediately greeted with the sound of the door sliding shut.

Glancing out from his alcove, Wilbur sighed when he saw the meeting room was closed off. No sound was escaping through the cracks, which meant that it was hopeless for Wilbur to think he could hear anything that was going on inside.

He slumped against the wall, dragging his hands through his hair and cursing internally for his bad luck. It was almost worse to know that they were having another clandestine meeting without being able to find out what was going on inside. If Wilbur hadn't overheard Tina and Karl talking just now, at least he'd be able to go about his day without his nerves practically eating up his insides.

Well, his nerves would've done that either way. But it was certainly worse now than it would've been otherwise.

Once again, Wilbur was so lost in his own thoughts he didn't hear the footsteps until a figure appeared in the corner of his eye.

"Wil?"

"Fuck!" Wilbur yelped, whipping his head around to meet Aimsey's dark eyes.

Aimsey jumped at Wilbur's shout, their flowers sticking straight up like they were mirrors of their body. "Cachu! You scared me!" They exclaimed, and it took Wilbur a beat to recognize the curse as a word in Floslia—Floslium's most common language.

"You scared me first!" Wilbur argued, using the wall to push himself to his feet.



“Well I’m not the one hiding in a dark corner for no good reason,” Aimsey pointed out, folding their arms over their chest. “What are you doing anyway?”

And it was then Wilbur realized how bad of a position he was in right now. Crouched in an alcove, ear pressed to the wall right next to the meeting room—if Aimsey took a moment to actually look at him, they’d realize what he was doing in seconds.

“I was just, uh-” he stammered, struggling to come up with an excuse. “I was going for a walk.”

It was a pathetic excuse and he knew it, but it was the only thing he could think of in such a split second moment.

Aimsey narrowed their eyes, looking him up and down. He squirmed under their gaze, wondering if he could make up some bullshit lie about Tommy waiting for him back in their room so he could leave before they had time to question him.

But before he could try to say anything else, Aimsey let out a breath, and their face relaxed.

“You and Tommy didn’t come to breakfast this morning,” they pointed out, their voice soft. “Did you guys get into a fight or something?”

Well, they did, but that wasn’t why they didn’t come to breakfast. Still, Aimsey didn’t need to know that.

“Yeah,” Wilbur admitted, letting his shoulders drop. “I was out walking to try and cool my head off.”

“Do you need to talk about it?” Aimsey offered, the flowers in their hair and on their cheeks turning to face Wilbur.

Wilbur shook his head. “No, it’s fine.”

He couldn’t tell anyone about their argument this morning. The fact that Tommy was starting to give into the demands of the Empire was something no one in the palace could find out about. If word somehow got back to Philza or Technoblade, they would know their plan was working, and would start to push even harder than they already were.

Aimsey’s flowers drooped, but they didn’t seem angry with Wilbur. Instead, they just seemed resigned as they let out a quiet sigh, before meeting his eyes again.

“That’s fine. I get it. But are you okay?”

That question took Wilbur off guard, because it wasn’t what he expected Aimsey to say at all. Maybe he expected them to push, or maybe he expected them to get annoyed at his blatant distrust and walk away. Maybe he just expected them to accept the rejection and leave since he was making it clear he didn’t want to be in this conversation right now.

He didn’t expect them to ask if he was okay. Not with genuine concern that was practically dripping from their words.

The truthful answer sat on the tip of his tongue. *No*. No, he wasn't okay. No, he hadn't been okay since that fateful night on Eldingvegr. No, nothing was okay anymore and he wasn't sure if there was any way it could ever be okay again.

But he couldn't show weakness. Not now. Especially not to a member of the Empire.

"It was just a stupid fight. We're fine," he lied.

Aimsey frowned, clearly not believing him. But before they could open their mouth to call him out, he was shoving past them to get out of the alcove, turning on a heel to hurry back to his room.

"I better get going. I'll see you later, Aimsey," Wilbur said, refusing to turn back as he rushed away from them.

He heard them call out to him, but he ignored it and kept walking. For a minute, he could hear their footsteps following him. But they seemed to realize it was a bad idea to push him anymore, and the clicking of their shoes against the stone dropped off, and Wilbur was alone again.

Although Wilbur hadn't necessarily been trying to go back to his room yet, his feet carried him there anyway. When he spotted his and Tommy's door, his gut clenched, nervous to see how Tommy would greet him when he came back inside. While he debated turning around and heading to the library to hide for a few more hours, Wilbur was still in his pajamas, and knew he was going to have to get changed sooner or later.

Stopping right outside the door, Wilbur took a breath to try and slow the pounding in his chest. Things were fine. Even if Tommy was still giving him the cold shoulder, it wouldn't last for long. Worst case scenario, he just got changed and left again. Sure, it was avoidance, but Wilbur thought he was allowed a little avoidance given how much he'd been going through as of late.

Right before Wilbur could press the button to open the door, there was a soft *whoosh*, and the door opened on its own.

To Wilbur's surprise, he wasn't met with Tommy's angry scowl. Instead, he found himself face to face with Ranboo.

The enderian flinched at their unexpected eye contact, and Wilbur quickly dropped his gaze to stare at his chin instead.

"Oh, uh, hi Prince Orpheus," Ranboo said, flashing Wilbur a weak smile.

"Um, hello Ranboo," Wilbur replied, mind reeling as he tried to figure out why Ranboo would be in his room. "Are you-"

"I was just leaving!" Ranboo quickly explained, sidestepping Wilbur to get out of the doorway. "Tommy and I were just talking for a bit. But I'm heading out now so, uh, you guys

have the room to yourselves again.” A nervous laugh bubbled up from his throat, and it grated on Wilbur’s ears.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “Theseus. You call him The-”

“I gave him permission to call me that,” Tommy told him from inside the room. Now that Ranboo had moved out of the way, Wilbur could see Tommy sprawled across the bed, hugging a pillow to his chest and an empty breakfast plate sitting in front of him.

*What?* While Wilbur had noticed that Tommy and Ranboo were growing closer by the day, he didn’t think it was anywhere near the level of Tommy granting Ranboo permission to use his personal name.

When Wilbur’s eyes darted back to Ranboo, he could see that the kid was practically sweating bullets.

“Anyway I- I gotta go,” Ranboo stammered, hurrying down the hall. “See you guys later!”

And just like that, Ranboo was gone. Wilbur stared after him for a moment, before letting out a deep breath and turning back to his room. He fully stepped inside, the doors hissing as they slid shut behind him. Then, he was alone with Tommy once again.

Tommy wasn’t looking at him. His eyes were on his empty plate, and he was twisting his fingers into the fabric of the pillowcase.

“Why was he in here?” Was the first thing Wilbur asked.

“Because I called him in,” Tommy explained.

He waited for an elaboration. Tommy didn’t provide it.

“Why?” Wilbur pushed.

At this, Tommy scoffed. “I was trading all of our top state secrets with him because I fucking felt like it. Is that what you wanna hear?”

Wilbur frowned. “Seriously Tommy, why was he in here?”

“Why do you fucking think?” Tommy asked, finally looking up to raise an eyebrow at him. “We got into a fight, I was pissed, so I wanted to rant to someone about it.”

The situation itself wasn’t unfamiliar to Wilbur. Back on Eldingvegr, whenever he and Tommy got into a fight it was practically routine for Tommy to hole himself in a room with Tubbo to complain about what a bitch Wilbur was. Meanwhile, Wilbur would do the same thing with Niki, ranting to her about how childish and stubborn Tommy was, and Niki would listen as patiently as she could before telling him outright what an idiot he was being.

They both liked to complain about their problems to those they trusted. That wasn’t something Wilbur had a problem with.

What Wilbur had a problem with was the fact that trust wasn't a luxury either one of them had anymore.

"Did you tell him what we fought about?" Wilbur questioned, taking a step towards the bed. "Did you tell him what you told me about the negotiations?"

Instead of shrinking back at the dark note in Wilbur's voice, Tommy seemed to take it as a challenge. He straightened up, meeting Wilbur's gaze with as angry of a glare as he could muster.

"What does it matter to you? Ranboo's my friend. I can choose what I want to tell him."

"He might be your friend, but he's also Technoblade's protege," Wilbur reminded him, his words like shards of glass. "You have to assume anything you tell him is going to go straight back to--"

"That's not true!" Tommy shouted, cutting Wilbur off. "Ranboo's my friend, he wouldn't do that!"

"You don't know that," Wilbur shot back, slamming his hands down on the edge of the mattress. "You've known Ranboo for, what, a month? You have no goddamn clue if you can trust him or not."

"But I know I can because I've actually talked to him!" Tommy snapped. "You're always such a dick to him, treating him like he's an idiot or that he's not even worth the time of day. But he's actually a genuinely *good* person. You'd know that if you stopped treating him like he's the enemy."

"But he is the enemy!" Wilbur shouted back. "Everyone here is our enemy, what don't you get about that?! The other leaders are literally having a secret meeting right this fucking second, probably discussing a thousand more ways they can screw us over!"

Now that made Tommy falter.

"What?"

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur forced a slow breath through his nose to try and calm the heat rising in his chest. "Just now when I was walking in the halls, I heard Tina and Karl talking about a meeting they were going to. I watched them go into the meeting room, with Puffy saying the others had already arrived."

"Did you hear what they were talking about?" Tommy asked, furrowing his brows.

Wilbur shook his head. "They shut the doors. But either way, they're probably planning some more bullshit against us right this second."

"But Ranboo's not in that meeting," Tommy pointed out.

"His mentor is though," Wilbur reminded him, straightening up from the bed and sliding his coat off his shoulders.

Tommy narrowed his eyes. "You're a fucking asshole, you know."

Huffing, Wilbur pretended the words didn't feel like a stab in the chest as he turned to head towards the bathroom, hoping a shower might calm him down. "If I'm an asshole that keeps us from losing everything, then so be it."

Without waiting to hear Tommy's response, Wilbur hurried into the bathroom, letting out a shaky breath as soon as the doors slid shut behind him. His entire body felt too heavy to hold up, and when the water began to beat down on his skin, he found himself sliding down to the ground. The cool tile dug into his back, a stark contrast to the hot water droplets pounding against his face.

It wasn't relaxing. Not in the slightest. But even still, his mind began to drift.

*"It's okay, Wil," Niki whispered to him, her scaled hands rough against his palms as she squeezed his fingers. "Just try to breathe."*

*He couldn't. He couldn't breathe. There was a cage around his lungs, keeping him from sucking in even a single full breath. He was gasping for air, dark spots dancing around his vision as he pressed himself further against his bed, trying to hide the tears streaking down his cheeks.*

*"No no no-" he hiccuped, before another sob tore from his throat. "He hates me, Niki. He hates me and- and he's not going to forgive me."*

*"He doesn't hate you," she reassured him, tracing circles into the backs of his hands with her thumbs. "Tommy's just mad, but he doesn't actually hate you. You know he always forgives you eventually."*

*"Not this time," Wilbur insisted, shaking his head. "I fucked up. I fucked up so badly-"*

*"What did you say?" Niki asked, her voice soft but firm.*

*Wilbur took a shuddering breath, his lungs rattling against the cage once again. "I didn't mean it. I don't even know why I said it."*

*"I'm sure you didn't mean it, but what did you say?"*

*He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to meet Niki's eyes as shame bubbled up inside of him. "We were having a fight, and he got really mad. He asked if- if I-" his breathing hitched, but he kept going. "He asked if I ever wished that it was him that died instead of mum."*

*Niki sucked in a sharp breath. "And you..."*

*"I said yes," Wilbur confessed, the words spilling out of him in a sob. "I don't know why I said yes because that's not true. I wouldn't- I wouldn't trade anything for Tommy. But I was just so mad and he was so mad and my head was going too fast-" he gasped for air again, the dark spots growing larger in his vision.*

*Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. He really couldn't breathe now. Tommy was going to hate him forever for that. It was the worst thing he could've said, and Wilbur had no idea why his traitorous mind had made him whisper yes instead of no like he so desperately wanted to.*

*Suddenly, there were scaled palms cupping his cheeks, and Wilbur was forced to meet Niki's glowing gaze as she pulled his head away from his knees.*

*"Wilbur," she began, her eyes narrowed. "Calm down."*

*Her words echoed with her Voice, and the command sunk into Wilbur's bones. The cage lifted from his chest without any effort on his part, and his heart rate dropped almost immediately. The panic ebbed away, and Wilbur slumped forward, his face falling into Niki's shoulder as he went completely boneless.*

*"I'm sorry," she whispered, wrapping her arms around him to hug him tight. "You were going to pass out."*

*"It's okay," Wilbur whispered back, his words slurred. "I needed it."*

*The seconds ticked on. Wilbur's thoughts drifted back to him, moving far slower than they had just a few moments before. He could breathe again, and the panic was no longer seizing every cell in his body.*

*"Tommy will forgive you," Niki told him. "But you can't run away from this. You need to apologize to him and explain that you didn't mean it."*

*Wilbur took a breath, relishing in how he was finally able to fill his lungs all the way. Then, he let it out, and pulled back to meet Niki's eyes again.*

*"Would you forgive me if you were in Tommy's shoes?" He asked softly.*

*Niki stared at him for a moment, conflict dancing in her gaze. Then, she shook her head.*

*"No. I wouldn't. But I'm not as kind of a person as Tommy is," she told him, dropping her hands from his shoulders. "You know I hold grudges. I don't think Tommy could hold a grudge to save his life."*

*Wilbur let out a weak laugh. "Yeah, that's a good point."*

*There was another pause.*

*"I don't think I'm a kind person either," Wilbur then admitted, the words little more than a whisper.*

*Niki stared at him for a moment, her expression unreadable.*

*Then, she took his hand in her own again, and the tips of her nails just barely dug into his skin. "I don't think either of us were meant to be kind."*

*Wilbur squeezed her hand in return to show he felt the same.*

When Wilbur got out of the shower, he found the room empty with a note left on the bed. It was from Tommy, explaining that he had been summoned to go train with Technoblade again, and that he would see Wilbur in a few hours.

It was short and to the point. Wilbur knew his brother well enough to read the cutting tone between the lines. Just because their argument had been put on pause didn't mean anything was resolved. Not even in the slightest.

Maybe Wilbur should've spent the day out of his room, wandering around the palace or reading more books in the library in an attempt to get out of his own head. But he didn't. Instead, he laid down on the bed, curling up into a ball as if he could hide himself away from the world. Almost like if he was far away enough, his problems wouldn't be able to reach him.

His mind drifted, and he found himself floating in a space between waking and sleep. He was aware he was on the bed, and in a way it was as if he was watching himself from above his own body. But he wasn't fully there. His mind was hazy, and it was a blessed relief from the frenzy that his thoughts had been in for the past few days.

Time passed. Wilbur wasn't sure how long he was floating for, but it was a long time. At one point, he heard the door open, but it was far away. He didn't really register Tommy's footsteps, or the voice asking him questions. The sound was muffled, as if he was underwater. His back was turned away from the door so he couldn't see Tommy, and after a few minutes of hearing Tommy say stuff that was probably directed at him but he couldn't really understand, he was able to hear one thing.

"I guess you're sleeping," Tommy muttered. At least, Wilbur was fairly sure what he said. It was difficult to make out while he was floating like this.

Then, the door hissed again, followed by the distant sound of the shower turning on. Even though he wasn't sleeping, he felt the exhaustion tugging on his eyes. The sound of the shower got louder and louder as the floaty feeling subsided, quickly being taken over by fatigue weighing down his bones.

Wilbur was asleep before Tommy got out of the shower.



Upon waking, Wilbur found Tommy lounging on one of the chairs in front of the fireplace. He was no longer floating, and a part of him wondered if that had just been a strange dream. Either way, he was back in his body, and with it came a wave of dread.

Even if he'd been able to tune out of his mind for a few hours, he couldn't do that forever. His problems were still very real, and right now were taking the form of the blonde teenager sitting on the other side of the room.

"How long did I sleep for?" Wilbur asked as he sat up, his voice hoarse.

Tommy glanced up, and Wilbur noticed there was a holo-pad in his lap. His expression was guarded as he met Wilbur's eyes, and Wilbur hated the palpable tension that sat in the air between them.

"A while," Tommy shrugged, swiping on the holo-pad again. "You were asleep when I got back from training, so I'm guessing you slept at least half the day."

"What time is it right now?" Wilbur asked, rubbing at his eyes.

"Almost dinner."

The short answer was so stiff, so cold coming from Tommy's mouth. It made a chill run down Wilbur's spine, and he knew that if there was a time to apologize, it should be now.

When Wilbur was fifteen, he had gotten into an argument with Tommy over something stupid. It was a pointless thing in retrospect, but it had devolved into something much larger. Tommy had asked Wilbur if he wished it was him who died instead of their mother, and stupidly, Wilbur had said yes.

It wasn't true. And Wilbur had told Tommy that over and over again after Niki had encouraged him to apologize. For some reason, Tommy had forgiven him. Wilbur didn't think he deserved it and told him such, but Tommy had been firm in his decision that if he wanted to forgive Wilbur, he could, regardless of if Wilbur himself thought he deserved it or not.

Would Tommy forgive him now? Sure, the crux of their argument wasn't anywhere near as dramatic as that conversation so many years before. But unlike that childhood fight where their emotions clashed in a bright explosion of heat and flame, their current predicament was much more slow-building. Pressure was being pushed down on both of them, with the dial getting turned up more and more by the day. They were squeezed into a box together with the walls closing in on them. This anger between them weren't bright flames, but instead low-burning coals that were growing hotter with every sharp word or dirty look.

If a piece of glass were snapped in two, it could be glued back together. But if it was crushed into a thousand pieces, it was ruined forever.

But while Wilbur knew this, knew that he needed to apologize now before the pressure got even worse, he couldn't bring himself to open his mouth. Because he didn't feel like he was in the wrong here. Of course he understood why Tommy was upset, but he didn't trust anyone in the palace, and rightfully so. This wasn't the kind of situation they could make friends in. They were surrounded by enemies on all sides, and the fact that Tommy couldn't seem to recognize that was going to be their downfall.

"What are you reading?" Wilbur asked instead after a few moments, not wanting to let the dead air sit between them for too long.

Tommy didn't look up from the holo-pad this time. "A book on fighting that Technoblade told me I might like."



Oh. That wasn't what Wilbur was expecting.

When he didn't respond within the first few seconds, Tommy raised an eyebrow. "What, no pointing out that Technoblade is just trying to manipulate me again? That I shouldn't be letting him fill my head with his beliefs or whatever the fuck?"

Wilbur winced at the acid in Tommy's words, hating the way it felt like his skin was burning where his vitriol had landed. "No, I was just surprised. Doesn't seem like a book on fighting would be really, uh, as helpful as actually training would be."

"It's more about the philosophy of it all. How to prep your mind and shit," Tommy shrugged, his tone slightly less hostile now. "I dunno. I think it's interesting."

Philosophy. How to prepare your mind to fight. Those words set off alarm bells in Wilbur's head as he wondered if Technoblade was trying to push his personal philosophies onto Tommy. But he shoved that aside, because that's exactly what Tommy expected Wilbur to say.

"How is it interesting?" Wilbur asked instead.

Tommy blinked, the lingering anger fading from his face and being replaced with genuine surprise. A beat passed. Then another. Wilbur watched the lines on his forehead soften one by one, and something like hope rose up inside his chest once again.

When Tommy opened his mouth to speak though, he was cut off by sharp knocking.

"It's dinner time, gents!" Jack called out from behind the door.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur swallowed down a curse as he pushed to his feet and walked to the door. He practically slammed the button to open it, and glared when he found himself face to face with Jack Manifold.

"Do we have to leave right this second?" Wilbur asked, annoyed that he had been so close to reaching some kind of peace with Tommy for a moment, only for it to be interrupted.

Jack didn't seem phased by Wilbur's anger. "Yup. Everyone's gotta attend. Captain's orders."

...what?

"Do you know why?"

"Nope," Jack shook his head. "But I think I heard something about an announcement being made."

Immediately, Wilbur's blood went cold. An announcement. After the secret meeting he'd seen the other leaders having this morning. After what Philza had told him the night before.

This couldn't be good.

"An announcement?" Tommy questioned, materializing at Wilbur's side.

“Yeah, like I said, I don’t know the details. That shit’s above my pay grade. But you two gotta be there, so let’s get going,” Jack told them, already stepping further back into the hall.

Wilbur shared a look with Tommy, and was relieved to see none of the anger that had been practically sparking off of him only a few minutes before. Now Tommy seemed more confused than anything else, and Wilbur was sure his face echoed the sentiment.

“I guess we might as well get going then,” Wilbur said, slipping on his shoes before following Jack into the hall. After a moment of hesitation, Tommy followed, and the door slid shut behind them.

The halls were empty as they made their way to the dining hall. No voices echoed through the corridor, they didn’t catch a glimpse of any other guards going about their daily duties. It was just Wilbur, Tommy, Jack Manifold, and the sound of their footsteps bouncing off the walls.

Instead of taking them to the dining hall though, Jack turned at the last second, and Wilbur belatedly realized they were going to the meeting room. Jack picked up his pace of walking, and after a few more twists and turns, they were back to the same hall Wilbur had been in earlier that morning.

The doors to the meeting room were being held open by Puffy. She nodded at Jack as he came into view, gesturing for Wilbur and Tommy to go inside. Then, with Jack left outside, Puffy followed them into the room, and Wilbur’s breath caught in his throat.

It was a full meeting again. Michael, Schlatt, Karl, Tina, the Badlands, Technoblade, and Philza were all already seated. The same two spots besides Philza were left open as always, and Wilbur had to shove down the fear writhing in his gut as he settled himself shoulder to shoulder with the Emperor once more.

“I thought we were going to get dinner,” Tommy said as soon as they were settled, his eyes narrowed as he looked around the room.

Technoblade huffed. “You’ll get to eat soon. This meeting shouldn’t take long.”

Well, that wasn’t very promising.

“We were informed there was an announcement of some kind being made?” Wilbur questioned, ignoring the way everyone’s eyes on him made him feel as though bugs were wriggling under his skin.

“You’re correct,” Philza said beside him, and Wilbur had to fight the urge not to flinch. “The announcement is rather simple, in all honesty. You know how the reason we called this summit in the first place was so the Antarctic Empire could work out its strategy regarding the Eldingvegr situation as a whole, and our personal negotiations would resume after the summit had ended?”

Wilbur nodded, a palpable weight settling on his shoulders.

“Well, we’ve reached a conclusion for what the Empire’s goal will be with the negotiations regarding Eldingvegr. That means the summit is over, and all the other leaders will be returning to their home planets tomorrow morning.”

Wait, what?

The summit was- it was *over*? Just like that? They hadn’t gotten enough time at all. He and Tommy were supposed to use this time to make connections with the other leaders, to try and garner sympathy and learn what kind of people they were dealing with. It felt as though they had only just begun to scratch the surface of that goal. The leaders couldn’t be leaving now.

“But- But our negotiations are still ongoing,” Wilbur pointed out, wincing when his voice cracked. “Negotiations that I thought we needed the rest of the leaders’ input on?”

“We’ve decided what the Empire’s goal is going to be with the negotiations regarding Eldingvegr, and we’ve also discussed what parameters we’re all willing to set in regards to compromise. Now that that’s been settled, you’ll be resuming negotiations with myself and Techno,” Philza explained, and Wilbur could practically feel the smugness radiating off of him in waves.

“So that’s it?” Tommy then asked, straightening up in his seat. “The summit is over, just like that?”

“Unfortunately, we have to return back to our own planets to resume our duties,” Sam explained, his voice far gentler than anything else in the room. “I’ve already been away from Decima for far too long.”

“I keep getting calls about decisions I gotta make on Serenity, and it’s driving me a bit nuts to try and do all of it over a shitty video call,” Michael chimed in, slumping back in his seat.

“The harvest is happening on Nona right now, so me and Seapeekay gotta hurry back to manage our exports,” Antfrost told them, his ears twitching.

“Trust me, I’d stay here if I could,” Tina jumped in, pouting as she folded her arms over her chest. “It’s boring on Kinoko, but Karl’s gotta get back for the festival, and the council has been at a standstill on one of our votes since I’m usually the tiebreaker in our group.”

“The festival is for when the lines between The Other and The Between get blurred,” Karl explained excitedly, before anyone even asked what Tina had meant by that. “It’ll go very well, but I need to get back to make sure that actually happens.”

Shit. All of them had to leave. Wilbur should’ve realized they were running on limited time sooner, but now it was too late. They had missed their chance.

Glancing to the right, Wilbur met Philza’s eyes once again. There was mirth dancing in his gaze. This was another victory being handed to him. Another chip in Wilbur and Tommy’s plan. Without the other leaders around, they would be solely at the mercy of Philza and Technoblade’s whims. No one would be able to influence them one way or the other.

Judging by the smile on Philza's face, Wilbur could tell this was exactly what he wanted. And he hated the man for it.

After a few more platitudes were exchanged, Philza dismissed them all for dinner. Wilbur and Tommy were silent as they walked to the dining hall, and Wilbur wasn't sure if it was because they were both feeling defeated at the news, or if Tommy didn't want to risk speaking to Wilbur after such a drastic upset in their plans.

Dinner was a quiet affair. Not for the other leaders, who were celebrating their imminent departure with plenty of Zephyrs IV vodka, but it was quiet for Tommy and Wilbur. Ranboo and Aimsey had already heard the news, and they filled the dead air hanging over their part of the table with random chatter about inane things like food and clothing. Tommy joined in on the conversation every once in a while, but Wilbur stayed silent throughout the entire thing.

Sand dripped from the hourglass in his mind as he stared at his food. Every second was a second wasted. But what would they have been able to do with more time? The Badlands proved they were going to be of no help to them. Kinoko was a bust given how Karl seemed dead set on the prediction that Eldingvegr was going to join the Empire. Serenity certainly didn't seem like they would be sympathetic to Eldingvegr when they posed to gain so much from them joining the Empire. And Mantle... well, Wilbur knew full well that Mantle wasn't going to give a shit.

It had been a futile effort from the start. The realization weighed on Wilbur's shoulders as Jack led them both back to their room, who was wise enough to know it wasn't a good day to make chit chat with either of the princes.

As soon as they were back in their room, Tommy turned to Wilbur, clearly expecting him to say something on the new development. And Wilbur knew he should. He needed to come up with a new plan, or emphasize how they weren't giving up yet, how this wasn't a major setback for either of them.

But he couldn't. Not tonight. Not when he knew that even the simple act of breathing was something he was only being *allowed* to do. That if Philza wanted, his breathing would stop, and there would be nothing anyone could do about it.

"Wil?" Tommy asked as Wilbur silently padded over to the bed, his voice far more fragile than it had been before. "Are we gonna talk about this?"

"Not tonight," Wilbur murmured, slipping off his shoes and taking off his coat as he crawled onto the bed. He set his glasses on the nightstand, and buried his face in the pillow to block out the light still on above his head. "Just... not tonight, Tommy."

Wilbur wasn't even tired, thanks to the fact that he'd slept all day. But he didn't have the energy to talk. The energy to even try to think his way out of this. Not right now. Not tonight.

Tommy was silent for a moment, and Wilbur could feel his eyes on his back. Then, the light was switched off, and the bed dipped as Tommy crawled in beside him. Lifting his head from

the pillow, Wilbur could see the freckles painted over Tommy's nose and cheeks glowing a soft blue, illuminating his pale eyes as he rolled over so he was face to face with Wilbur.

The blue glow of their freckles lit up the space between them like starlight. But the stars had always been out of their reach. Whether it was on the eternal twilight of Eldingvegr, or miles beneath the ice on Zephyr IV, the stars were something Wilbur was wholly unfamiliar with.

"You know that it's gonna be okay, right, Wil?" Tommy whispered after a minute of silence. "No matter what happens, we'll figure it out. I know we will."

But that wasn't true. It was a platitude. A soft lie meant to act as a balm on a bleeding stab wound. Tommy meant well with it, but Wilbur couldn't bring himself to even pretend to believe it.

So instead of responding, he just rolled over onto his other side so he wasn't facing Tommy anymore. He couldn't bear to look at the hope shining in his little brother's eyes, knowing that he'd failed him in so many countless ways.

Tommy made a hurt noise at the brush off, but didn't say anything else. Wilbur pretended the sound didn't pierce straight through his chest, and hoped that if he pretended enough, he could make himself believe it too.

Time passed. Wilbur was wide awake, but it didn't take long for Tommy's breathing to even out behind him.

Once he was asleep, Wilbur pushed to his feet without thinking of where he was going. He couldn't just sit in the bed all night, trapped with his thoughts of failure as the morning loomed over him. No, he needed to get out. To find a distraction.

That's how Wilbur found himself standing at Schlatt's door, dressed in his pajamas and craving the burn of vodka in his throat.

"Gonna be honest, I was expecting you to stop by tonight," Schlatt said as soon as he opened the door, his grin dripping with sleaze and mirth. "Need a nightcap, loverboy?"

"Fucking please," Wilbur muttered, shouldering his way past Schlatt and into his room.

Schlatt only laughed as he shut the door behind him. Wilbur settled himself in the same plush chair as last time, gaze fixed on the fireplace as he listened to Schlatt pouring the drinks behind him. The room was lit up in shades of warm orange and yellow, flames dancing along the walls and warmth radiating through the space like he had the heater turned high.

There was a clink as Schlatt set the glass down next to Wilbur. He turned and saw the drink had been filled almost to the top, and he traced his fingers along the intricately carved crystal as he took a sip.

The vodka burnt his throat, and Wilbur hummed pleasantly at the distraction. He then took a larger sip, wincing at the taste, before setting his glass back down.

“I gotta say, I’m more than a little bummed out to be leaving so soon,” Schlatt told him as he sat in his own chair, taking a long sip of his drink.

“Gonna miss the vodka?” Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow.

Schlatt huffed. “Duh. This shit is great, but goddamn is it expensive to import.” He took another long swig, swirling the clear liquid in his glass before lifting his eyes to meet Wilbur’s. “I’m also more than a little annoyed that I didn’t invite you for a drink sooner. Feel like we could’ve had a good thing going, Orpheus.”

Wilbur frowned. “Thought you weren’t one to bullshit your intentions, Schlatt.”

“I’m not,” Schlatt said, leaning back in his seat. “Yeah, I think you’re a stupid kid who needs to give up on trying to stay out of the Empire because it’s fucking pointless. But you’re also not that bad to have a drink with when you’re not acting all prissy and shit.”

Picking up his glass again, Wilbur took another long swig. There was a low buzz rising in the back of his mind, and his chest felt warm as the vodka settled into his blood.

“Don’t try to tell me we could’ve been friends. I’m not fucking stupid.”

Schlatt laughed at this, the light of the fire glinting off his shiny horns as he tilted his head back. “Yeah, no shit. We’re not friends because you don’t have friends in politics. That’s not how the game works.” Another sip. “No trust, no friends, nothing except power grabs and vague threats. That’s the life of a politician, baby.”

Wilbur thought back to his conversation with Philza. That had been a threat and a power grab rolled into one. All hostility, but with a core of genuine care somewhere deep down. That was what had confused Wilbur the most about the entire encounter.

“On the plus side, at least I won’t have to hear Karl’s raving hallucinations anymore,” Wilbur huffed, his gaze drifting back to the fire.

“Oh yeah, thank fuck for that. I don’t understand half the stuff that comes out of his mouth,” Schlatt said, kicking up his feet to rest on a footstool. “You ever tried the Kinoko shrooms by the way?”

“No, can’t say I have,” Wilbur told him.

“Don’t do it. I tried ‘em once when I was visiting Kinoko as part of some diplomatic party thing. I woke up twelve hours later, butt ass naked and with a notebook sitting in front of me that read ‘Secrets of the Universe’ on the front page in my own handwriting.”

Wilbur chuckled. “What were the secrets of the universe?”

“Well, according to all the infinite wisdom I had when I was high off my ass, apparently the answer to everything was protein powder,” Schlatt said, cracking a grin as he took another swig.

“Protein powder?”

“Protein powder. Nothing else. That’s all that was written.”

Tipping his head back to the ceiling, Wilbur laughed louder than he had in ages, and let the vodka warm him from the inside out.



The next morning, Wilbur woke with a horrible hangover and a rancid taste in his mouth.

After spending a few hours chatting about pointless stuff with Schlatt, Wilbur had stumbled back to his room, utterly piss drunk and eager to pass out. As soon as his head hit the pillow he had been out like a light, and woke up several hours later to a sharp knocking at his door that felt like a hammer splitting open his skull.

Now he was dressed and somewhat presentable. This time, Wilbur didn’t bother trying to hide his nightcap with Schlatt from Tommy, because he knew that Tommy would immediately notice how hungover he was even if he tried to hide it.

Tommy didn’t seem thrilled, but also could tell that it wasn’t worth it to try and ask Wilbur what he had talked to Schlatt about while he was in such a thick haze. Instead, he just threw clothes at Wilbur and helped him look somewhat not dead, and had to drag him out of their room so they could give their farewells to the leaders.

They were in the throne room again. Wilbur’s head was pounding something fierce, and nausea had settled like an old friend into the back of his throat. The lights were too bright, and even the lightest of footsteps made him flinch. All he wanted was to crawl under his blankets and not exist for a few more hours, but his own choices had led him here, and now he had to suffer the consequences.

It was similar to the day the leaders arrived for the summit. Philza was seated on his throne with Technoblade beside him, while Wilbur and Tommy stood off to the side, waiting to be addressed.

“It was a pleasure meeting you both, Prince Theseus and Prince Orpheus,” Michael was saying to them, bowing before turning to Philza and Technoblade. “As always, thank you for hosting, Your Majesty.”

“We’ll be in touch, Chancellor,” Philza said, nodding at Michael.

With that, Michael McChill was the first out of the room, and Wilbur suspected they were going in order of arrival.

“Kinoko appreciates your graciousness as always,” Tina said next, speaking in a far more formal register than she had been the day before. Then, she turned to dip her head at Tommy and Wilbur. “May The Between bless your future, and the Other bless your past.”

Unsure of how to respond to that, both Wilbur and Tommy just nodded at her in return. That seemed to be enough, because she then moved back and allowed Karl to step up.

“Your Majesty, Your Imperial Highness,” Karl greeted, dipping his head at both Philza and Technoblade, “things are gonna be great real soon. The future is promising as always.”

“Thank you both, Seer and Your Highness for taking the time to come here,” Philza said, nodding to the two of them.

Karl’s golden eyes then flickered to Wilbur and Tommy, and both of them flinched when the Seer stepped right in front of them, and held out a hand to shake.

There was a beat of silence as he waited expectantly. This wasn’t court etiquette, but when it became clear he wasn’t going to budge, Tommy shook his hand. Karl grinned and squeezed Tommy’s fingers once before dropping them, and then turned to Wilbur to do the same.

This time, when Wilbur took Karl’s hand, he pulled Wilbur closer so he could whisper in his ear.

“This isn’t goodbye. I’ll be seeing you soon, at your induction ceremony into the Empire.”

Without thinking, Wilbur ripped his hand out of Karl’s and stumbled back. He glared at the Seer, but Karl didn’t seem phased. He just kept smiling and returned to his spot beside Tina. The two bowed once more before following Michael out of the room.

Then, it was the Badlands turn to say their goodbyes.

“We thank you for your hospitality as always, Phil,” Bad said, grinning at Philza.

“And I thank all of you for coming here on such short notice,” Philza replied, folding his hands in front of him.

“We’ll be in contact with you soon,” Technoblade added, something knowing flashing in his eyes.

The Councillors then turned to the brothers, a range of emotions flashing over each of their faces. Bad and Skeppy both seemed impatient to leave, Antfrost was rather neutral, while Ponk and Seapeekay both had furrowed brows and tense shoulders. Out of all of them though, Sam seemed the most impacted by the impending goodbye, regret and sadness warring across his face as his gaze flickered over them both.

“Take care of yourselves, okay?” Sam said softly. “I hope to see you both soon.”

Wilbur refused to meet Sam’s eyes, while Tommy shot him the nastiest glare he could manage. Sam wilted under their coldness, but didn’t say anything else as he stepped back to rejoin the other Councillors.

As the Badlands filtered out, that only left one more person. Wilbur had to fight back the urge to snicker when he saw the deep bags hanging under Schlatt’s eyes, and struggled to straighten his shoulders as the President bowed at the Emperor.

“Great to see you as always, Your Majesty and Your Imperial Highness,” Schlatt drawled, the lights in the throne room reflecting off the grease on his face as he grinned at them. “Keep me



updated on how things go.”

“We will,” Philza said, his tone short.

“Try not to burn Mantle down in the meantime,” Technoblade huffed.

Schlatt chuckled at this. “We’ve got a deal, gentlemen.”

Then, he was turning to face Tommy and Wilbur, and Tommy grimaced as he stumbled towards them.

“See you later, brat,” was the only goodbye Tommy got, before Schlatt was turning his full focus to Wilbur. “I would say good luck with the negotiations, but I want you to fuck up and lose, so I won’t say that.”

Wilbur scoffed. “I wouldn’t expect anything else.”

“Good. Don’t have high expectations for anything or anyone.” Schlatt then patted Wilbur’s shoulder in some imitation of reassurance, but it was half-hearted to say the least. “You owe me a drink next time we see each other by the way.”

“Fair enough,” Wilbur acquiesced.

There was a brief pause. Even though they were both horribly hungover, Wilbur met Schlatt’s eyes, and he was certain they both perfectly understood the silent exchange that passed between them.

*We’re not friends, but maybe in another life we could’ve been.*

And then, Schlatt was stumbling back down the steps. With one last messy bow, he followed Puffy out of the throne room, the door sliding shut behind him.

The summit was over. Wilbur and Tommy were alone with Philza and Technoblade once more.

Which meant now it was time for the real negotiations to begin.

## Chapter End Notes

soooo much happened this chapter oh my god, I kept writing out parts and I was like "damn I still gotta have him get drinks with schlatt?? I still gotta have them leave???" but yeah thats why this chapter is so long. also I just really like writing arguments so the tommy and wilbur stuff ended up being way more than what was originally written in my plan

but uhh yeah, the boys are getting tense :) and now they're alone with phil and techno again :))

also, in case you can't tell, I'm really leaning into the slow build up of everything with this fic. one of my biggest things I regret about world forgetting was how I rushed a lot of the plot because I was afraid of losing interest. I already know I'm not going to lose interest in stars because I'm too in love with the world and the story, and I don't want that regret again, so I'm taking things as slow as I want. I have no idea how long this fic is going to be in total, but I won't be surprised if it ends up being longer than clinic

ok that's all! I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#), I actually just went through and changed out + added a LOT of songs because I made the playlist before I actually started writing the fic, and it's definitely gone in a somewhat different direction tonally than the initial playlist reflected. so make sure to check it out again even if you've seen it once, because it's been switched up quite a bit! it's mostly florence + the machine songs now ngl her songs literally just fit the vibes of this fic so well

pls pls pls let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day :D

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

(in case you didn't know, tumblr is the place where I answer and discuss a LOT of stuff about stars in detail, so if you have an interest in the more background heavy or behind the scenes parts of the story feel free to check out all the posts in my 'the stars and their children' tag on my blog)

# constellations in the ice

## Chapter Summary

After the summit, someone new has arrived.

## Chapter Notes

hello my lovelies!! welcome back to another update of my pride and joy!

now if you follow me on social media you might be like "bones why are you posting a chapter on your birthday don't most people wanna take a break on their birthday" but I wanted to! i figured it'd be a nice little bday gift to myself to post bc then I would get to see your reactions to the chapter in my emails!!

anyway, I really hope you guys enjoy this chapter! we get to meet a really fun new character who I think you're all gonna be happy to see :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first morning after the leaders had left, Wilbur found himself alone.

He woke up to Tommy yanking his boots on, sharing a half-hearted exchange with Wilbur about how he was being summoned to train with Technoblade once again. At this point, it seemed to be a near daily thing for Tommy to go spend time with the Emperor. And while Wilbur didn't like this, he knew there wasn't much he could do about it.

Tommy clearly enjoyed the time he and Technoblade spent together. Even if he tried to play it off, Wilbur knew he liked the training, and it wasn't hard to tell he was growing closer and closer with Technoblade each passing day. Sometimes, Wilbur debated asking Tommy if he could join. If he was there, at least he'd be able to keep an eye on the two of them. See the kinds of things they talked about. Get an idea of whatever lies Technoblade was shoving into his little brother's head.

But then Wilbur would remember being pinned to the floor. Then Wilbur would remember the uncomfortable weight of the dagger in his hand. Then Wilbur would remember how he didn't want to spend any more time with the Emperor than strictly necessary.

Wilbur didn't want to go, and that was that.

Maybe that made him a coward, or maybe that made him pathetic. He should've cared more.

The worry that hummed under his skin whenever he thought of what Technoblade could be telling Tommy should've been enough to get him off his ass and sticking to Tommy's side, even when he didn't want Wilbur there. But it just felt so... hopeless. Tommy's ideas were already shifting. The summit had ended. Their only chance at gaining an upper hand was gone.

Sometimes, when Wilbur stared at his hands for long enough, he could imagine he was holding blaziphan powder. Gold-orange dust would glitter like gemstones no matter how dull the light above them was, staining his palms as it slipped between the cracks of his fingers. Slipping slipping slipping—their chances of success, the life they used to have, the future they had been raised for. He was losing it. No matter how tightly he tried to cup his hands together, it would fall through.

Wilbur wanted to say he wasn't made for this, but he *was* made for this. Even though he was mad for this, his molding was cracked, and it was only growing more obvious by the day.

Sitting up in his bed with his blankets pooling around his legs, a knock at the door startled Wilbur out of staring at his empty palms. He rose to his feet, making sure he was presentable before hurrying to the door and pressing the button to open it.

Jack Manifold stood on the other side. A flicker of surprise flashed over his face when he realized Tommy wasn't in the room with Wilbur (which made sense since Ranboo had been the one to collect Tommy for training that morning), but the emotion was gone as soon as Wilbur noticed it, smoothed over by the icy air that all Zephyrs IV soldiers seemed to cling to like a mask.

"Is Theseus with Techno again?" Jack asked, glancing over Wilbur's shoulder and into the room.

"Yup," Wilbur shrugged, fighting to keep his face impassive. "I had breakfast brought to the room, so we don't need to—"

"Nah, they told me you called breakfast up. That's not why I'm here," Jack told him, his coat swaying around his legs as he shifted his weight. "I only need you."

Wilbur bit back a sigh. He had been hoping Jack wouldn't say that.

"Let me guess, His Majesty summoned me?" Wilbur asked, not bothering to hide the annoyance in his words.

"Look man, I just do what I'm told," Jack said, holding his hands up in mock surrender.

"Yeah yeah, I know. Don't shoot the messenger and shit," Wilbur muttered, turning back into the room to grab his coat from the closet. After tightening the coat's belt so the chill didn't seep under his shirt, Wilbur grabbed his glasses off the nightstand, and left the room to follow Jack down the hallway.

The walk was silent for the first few minutes. As always, Jack's back was held ramrod straight, and Wilbur noticed his head looked freshly-shaved compared to the regrowth he'd

seen crop up a few times before. Absently, Wilbur grabbed a strand of his own hair and tugged it down in front of his eyes. It was far longer than he usually let it get, and it was becoming a hassle to shove it out of his face.

“Is there someone who does haircuts in the palace?” Wilbur asked.

Jack stumbled over his own feet at the question, whipping his head around to frown at Wilbur. “*Huh?*”

“Your head is shaved,” Wilbur pointed out. “My hair’s getting way too fucking long. Is there someone here who can cut it for me?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so. I’ll have to get it approved by Puffy, but I can work that out,” Jack told him, eyes darting to his hair. “What’s it even like to have that much hair at one time? Gotta be annoying as shit to have that falling in your face all the time.”

“Have you never had your hair long?” Wilbur asked, although the mental gymnastics of trying to imagine Jack Manifold with hair was very difficult.

“Certainly not as long as yours,” Jack huffed. “It’s much easier to deal with like this.”

Pushing his curls out of his eyes again, Wilbur nodded. “I’m sure it is.”

Jack raised an eyebrow at him. “I mean, if you want a quick fix, I got some clippers in my room I can grab. I could give you the Jack Manifold original!”

Wilbur blinked. “Um... no thanks. I’d rather not be bald.”

“Suit yourself.”

They resumed making their way down the hall, the chilly air of the palace biting at Wilbur’s cheeks as he tugged his coat tighter around him. They passed the dining hall, with staff rushing about to clean up the dishes leftover from breakfast. He glanced inside as they passed to see if anyone he knew was still in there, but it was empty.

They turned down the hall towards the throne room. As the doors came into view, Wilbur prepared himself for the usual routine of Jack telling the guards why they were there so they could open the doors for them, but before they had even stopped walking, the doors slid open of their own accord.

A man Wilbur had never seen before strolled out, a sharp grin exposing a shimmering gemstone he had in place of one of his teeth. Unlike the other leaders, the man wasn’t wearing formal court attire, but he wasn’t wearing a guard’s uniform either. Instead, he wore dark trousers with golden birds embroidered into the fabric, glittering to an almost unnatural degree as they flew up the sides of his legs. Despite what the nice pants would suggest, he wore no coat, instead just donning a white button down shirt that had the sleeves rolled up, exposing an array of shimmering tattoos that seemed to ripple along his skin like feathers.

Besides that though, there was nothing that unusual about the man’s appearance. Dark, straight hair nearly fell to his shoulders, and it was pushed down by a knit cap similar to the

one Aimsey wore, with this one being a shade of dark grey as opposed to Aimsey's white. There was also a long scar trailing down the side of his face, passing through one of his eyes and tugging up the skin of his lip to expose his gemstone tooth. Wilbur had no desire to find out what kind of weapon could cause an injury like that.

As soon as Wilbur met the man's eyes, he stopped walking, his grin growing even wider as he looked Wilbur up and down.

"Well well well, the rumors were true. Phil's taking in strays now," the man said, taking a step towards Wilbur.

Up close now, Wilbur could see he towered over the man, and that he actually didn't seem to be that much older than Wilbur himself. In fact, they could even be the same age, but it was difficult to tell with the scar.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Wilbur asked, raising an unimpressed eyebrow.

"Name's Quackity," he said, folding his arms over his chest.

"So no title then," Wilbur muttered just loud enough for Quackity to hear the judgement lacing his tone. "I'm Orpheus, Prince of Eldingvegr. Although I have a feeling you already knew that."

Behind him, Wilbur could sense Jack stiffening, but he kept his face neutral as the man's grin grew.

"Oh, so he's got some bite to him," Quackity chuckled. "Pretty bold for a bastard son. Though I suppose you're used to getting away with a lot more since no one really pays attention to you, huh?"

The words were like a slap to the face. A shudder ran through him at that, but he did his best to suppress it. Still, judging by the way Quackity's eyes were darting over him, he hadn't missed the fact that his blow had landed.

"Don't let me keep you from your meeting, *Your Highness*," Quackity said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about anyway."

And with that, Quackity turned down the hall, footsteps growing fainter as the seconds ticked on. Wilbur watched him go, jaw clenched and hands curled into fists at his side. Who the fuck even was that guy? He didn't even have a title, yet he called Philza *Phil*. If he could get away with a transgression like that, it meant he had to be important in some way or another.

Which also begged the question—why was Wilbur only seeing him now? The timing wasn't lost on him. The leader's had left only the day before, and now this new and completely unknown figure appears? There had to be some kind of connection there.

A cough startled Wilbur out of his thoughts. Jack was giving him a pointed look, subtly gesturing for him to go into the throne room.

Shit. He was supposed to talk to Philza.

Taking a breath to try and cool his blood, Wilbur forced himself to uncurl his fists and shook his hands out at his sides. Then, he nodded at Jack, before stepping through the doors and into the throne room.

In the past, anytime he entered the throne room, Philza had been sitting on the throne itself. His large wings would be spread out behind him, and his icy stare would look down on Wilbur, piercing straight through his skull to try and unspool all his thoughts.

This time though, Philza wasn't settled in the metal throne. Instead, he was standing by the windows on the left side of the room, staring out at the glittering sitting beyond.

As the doors slid shut behind him, Philza glanced away from the windows to meet Wilbur's eyes. For a moment, his training kicked in, and Wilbur had the urge to bow since he knew that was court etiquette for meeting the Emperor after having been summoned.

But Wilbur figured they were long past etiquette at this point. If he didn't bow, what was Philza going to do? Threaten him? Like he hadn't done that dozens of times already. They had dropped the pretenses of respect quite a while ago.

"Good morning, Orpheus," Philza greeted, dipping his head at Wilbur.

No title. Just Orpheus. Again, all pretenses of respect had disappeared.

"Morning, Philza," Wilbur replied, keeping his shoulders straight and head held high.

There was a beat as Philza raised his eyebrows in surprise. Wilbur's heart pounded in his chest as the icy gaze darted over him. He could practically hear the gears turning in Philza's head.

Then, he huffed, a slight smile flickering over his face. He turned back to the window, his feathers rustling as he stretched out his wings and his arms, gesturing for Wilbur to come closer. For a moment, Wilbur debated not responding. Keeping his feet firmly planted in the stone out of pure pettiness.

But that was too childish even for him. So he swallowed his annoyance, and walked over to the window, making sure to keep a few feet between him and Philza.

The city was as stunning as always. Metal and concrete towers glittered in the pale blue light reflecting off the ice cavern walls, lights flashed here and there as trains ran between floating railways, and there were blurred shapes and colors along the ground from moving crowds of people. It was so far away, yet so close at the same time.

Sometimes, Wilbur wondered what life outside the palace walls on Zephyr IV was like. Were the people here happy? Were they proud to live in the capital of one of the most powerful empires in the galaxy? Or was it just an aspect of their lives they had long since grown used to?

Wilbur didn't have the slightest idea. But judging by the pride that had practically lit up Philza's face as he stared out at the city, he would be surprised if there was any discontent in

the city at all. Despite all his intricacies, the one thing Wilbur felt he could read on Philza's face was that he *loved* Zephys IV. This place wasn't just the seat of his power, it was his home.

"I'll get straight to the point. I called you in here to let you know we're not going to jump straight back into negotiations right away," Philza told him, keeping his eyes fixed on the city.

Wait, what?

"Why not?" Wilbur asked, ignoring the relief that swelled in his chest at that.

"The summit took up quite a bit of my time," Philza explained, fiddling with the ends of his cloak. "I've been ignoring some of my duties to Zephys IV. Techno and I need some time to catch up on our work. Not to mention, I'm trying to get in contact with Themis to see what they make of your predicament, so I want to have some word with them before we continue on with anything."

Wilbur blinked. "Wait, you're trying to contact Themis?"

"Yes, but it's been... difficult," Philza said, and Wilbur almost had the urge to laugh. He would be shocked if Philza actually managed to get an audience with anyone from Themis, given how closed off they were to most of the galaxy.

"How long will things be delayed for?" Wilbur pushed.

Philza shrugged. "I'm not sure. Hopefully not too long, but you never know with these things."

His wording was vague, but the faint smile on his face was not.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "Bullshit. You're just putting it off because you know we can't do anything about it. You want to make us wait."

Maybe a few weeks ago Wilbur wouldn't have had the courage to speak so bluntly to Philza's face like that. But his patience was little more than a frayed thread, and the self-control he once had was something closer to a distant memory than a facet of the person he'd become over his time on Zephys IV.

At this point, Wilbur knew Philza didn't care about slights like that. This was quickly proved right when Philza laughed at Wilbur's tone.

"That's not my main motivation. I do actually have work to attend to. But I won't lie and say that's not a factor," Philza told him, letting his smile become more visible. "After all, it's not like you and Theseus have much else to do these days. Unless you two count arguing as part of your schedule."

Wilbur reeled back as if he'd been slapped. That- That had to be another power play. There was no way Philza could know they'd been arguing. Sure, they might be acting a bit colder



towards each other during meals, but the only explicit arguments they had happened in the privacy of their room.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Wilbur immediately said. “Theseus and I haven’t been arguing.”

Philza snorted. “You really aren’t as good at hiding your emotions as you think you are, mate. Techno sees Theseus nearly every day at this point, and it’s not hard to pick up on the fact that he doesn’t take kindly to you being brought up as a topic of conversation.”

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “He talks to the Emperor about me?”

“Don’t get your feathers ruffled, little bird. Theseus isn’t the one bringing you up, Techno is.”

Well- there were several things in that sentence that bothered him. One of them being the fact that Philza called him *little bird*, but that was secondary to what he said about Technoblade.

“Why does he bring me up?”

“He just wants to get an idea of how you’re doing. You stopped attending the training sessions, but that doesn’t mean he’s completely disinterested in you.” Pausing then, Philza rolled his shoulders, his wings shuffling with the gesture. “In the same vein, I’m not completely disinterested in Theseus either. But I find it easier to talk with you, while Techno finds it easier to talk with your brother.”

“I don’t know if easy is the word I would use to describe our conversations,” Wilbur scoffed.

Philza laughed again. “That’s a fair point. Talking to you isn’t easy by any means, but it certainly is entertaining.”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur kept his eyes fixed on the window. “I think we have wildly different interpretations of our interactions.”

“What, you don’t enjoy our little chats?” Philza asked, tone half-mocking as he raised an eyebrow at Wilbur.

“No, I don’t.”

Instead of getting upset at his words, Philza’s grin turned knowing. “I know that’s not true. I’m well-aware you don’t like me, but I also know that deep down, there’s a part of you that likes this challenge. Your words are your weapon, and you enjoy getting a chance to use your tongue as a dagger.”

But Wilbur’s tongue wasn’t a dagger. Not anymore. Honestly, it might not ever have been. His skills in wordplay had been crumbling more and more by the day, as his emotions overrode his logic and he made slip up after slip up.

“Stop acting like you know me,” Wilbur hissed, folding his arms over his chest.

“But I do know you, Orpheus,” Philza insisted. “Like I told you, you’re a lot like I was when I was younger.”

“And I don’t believe that for one fucking second,” Wilbur snapped, whipping his head towards Philza. “I’m not a fool. I know you’re trying to get inside my head.”

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not. Either way, I told you that I’m honest in my intentions. I’m not lying about that.”

Wilbur wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not. Because whether he was lying or being truthful, either option had troubling implications. If Philza was lying, then Wilbur knew he was trying to manipulate him to worm his way into his mind. But if Philza was being truthful, and Wilbur really did remind him of himself, then... well, Wilbur didn’t want to think about what that implied for the type of person he was. For the kind of man he might turn out to be.

Silence fell between them. It hung in the air, thick and choking in a way that was both satisfying and horrible to try and push back against. Wilbur wanted things between him and Philza to be tense. But at the same time, his silence felt like he was handing Philza another victory. Another pawn lost to the Emperor’s rook.

And in true victor fashion, Philza was the one to break the silence again.

“You do surprise me sometimes though,” Philza began, turning back to the window. “Like with Schlatt. Really didn’t think you two would find any sort of common ground, and yet your guard told me he summoned you to his room for a drink.”

Shit. Of course Philza knew about that.

“Schlatt and I didn’t get along. It was one drink, and he just summoned me there to try and convince me to give up and join the Empire,” Wilbur told him.

Philza snorted. “I’m not blind, Orpheus. You were hungover as fuck when the leaders left. You didn’t ask the servants to bring any liquor to your room, and I doubt you went off to go get plastered with Karl and Tina.”

Curling his hands into a fist, Wilbur took a measured breath through his nose. “Fine. We shared a drink twice. Doesn’t mean I don’t think he’s a drunken idiot.” Philza raised an eyebrow in obvious doubt at this, but before he could open his mouth, Wilbur spoke again. “Schlatt’s gone now anyway, so it doesn’t matter. Frankly, I’m more focused on that Quackity guy who I just ran into outside the throne room.”

Now that seemed to take Philza off guard. He blinked, the smile falling from his face for a moment.

“He spoke with you?” Was the first thing Philza asked.

“We exchanged a few words.”

Another beat passed. Then, Philza sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Of course he couldn’t keep his mouth shut,” Philza muttered, shaking his head. “What did he say to you?”

Wilbur huffed. “Insulted me.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him,” Philza snorted. He dropped his hand from his face, and lifted his head to meet Wilbur’s eyes again. “Try not to mind him. He’s a... business associate of mine. He’ll be spending some time around the palace for the next few weeks.”

“Is he from Zephyrs IV, or is he affiliated with another planet?” Wilbur asked.

“Neither. I don’t know what planet he’s from, but I don’t think he’s been there in quite some time. Our business isn’t related to those kinds of topics,” Philza explained to him. “It’s nothing related to Eldingvegr either, so don’t concern yourself with it.”

*Don’t concern yourself with it.* Well, that immediately made Wilbur want to concern himself with it.

“What’s his area of work?” Wilbur pushed.

“Transport,” Philza said, his tone clipped. Then, before Wilbur could try and ask for more information, he was whirling around and walking back to his throne. “Now, I hate to cut things short, but I have work I need to attend to. So you’re dismissed.”

Wilbur blinked at the abrupt change of pace in the conversation. While a part of him wanted to keep pushing it, he could tell that Philza wasn’t going to give him anything more than what he’d already said. Clearly, he didn’t think Wilbur needed to know why Quackity was in the palace. Of course, this just meant that Wilbur was going to try his best to find out, but Philza didn’t need to know that.

Instead of bothering to say a farewell, Wilbur simply turned on his heel and left the throne room, ignoring the weight of Philza’s eyes on his back the entire way out.

The entire walk back to his room, Wilbur couldn’t stop thinking about his conversation with the Emperor. As always, he felt like he was left with so much to unpack from Philza’s words. Of course the entire mystery surrounding Quackity was at the forefront of his mind, but there was also the fact that he knew about Wilbur and Schlatt’s shared drinks, or that Technoblade was apparently asking Tommy about him. And then the most troubling thing he learned from that conversation—Philza and Technoblade knew he and Tommy were arguing.

They couldn’t afford that kind of weakness. Couldn’t let either of them know that they were getting to the brothers. It would tell them to put more pressure on them, but they were both so close to breaking already, anymore pressure and they would be crushed.

Shit. This was really bad.

Because he was lost in thought while he walked, Wilbur hurried around a corner to follow Jack, and didn’t notice Ranboo heading his way until they nearly collided.

“Oh shit!” Wilbur yelled as he sidestepped out of the way, narrowly missing Ranboo. “Sorry Ranboo, I didn’t see you there.”

Ranboo, who had stumbled over his own feet trying to not walk straight into Wilbur, shook his head. “Oh no, I’m sorry. That was my fault. I should’ve looked where I was going.” He straightened up, readjusting the poofy sleeves of his blouse, before looking back at Wilbur. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” Wilbur said, waving the concern off.

“That’s- uh, that’s good. Yeah, that’s good,” Ranboo stammered, eyes darting quickly over Wilbur’s face before falling back to the ground.

There was an awkward pause. Wilbur knew he should keep walking. Say his goodbyes to Ranboo and hurry back to his room. But he could still hear Tommy’s words from a few days earlier echoing in his mind.

*“He’s actually a genuinely good person. You’d know that if you stopped treating him like he’s the enemy.”*

Tommy trusted Ranboo. Wilbur did not. And while Wilbur wanted to hold onto that paranoia, to listen to his gut and keep all his secrets locked inside, Tommy had a point. He hadn’t really had a proper conversation with Ranboo before. Not one on one.

He didn’t trust Ranboo and wasn’t going to start. But maybe he should try to just... talk to him. See what he was like. At the very least, it could give him an idea of how he got so close to Tommy so quickly.

“Have you... seen Tommy today?” Wilbur asked, wincing at how obviously uncomfortable he sounded.

Ranboo blinked. “Um, no, not today. I think he’s with Techno though if you’re looking for him?”

“Oh, no, that’s fine,” Wilbur said, shaking his head. “I figured he was. I was just curious if he was back from training yet.”

“He might be, I’m not sure. I’ve just been busy doing other stuff so, y’know, haven’t gotten a chance to chat with him.” Ranboo shifted from foot to foot, obviously unsure of where the conversation was going. “You, um, are you doing okay?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you, Your Highness.”

Wilbur couldn’t help but grimace at the title. Compared to him calling Tommy by his personal name, it made Wilbur seem a bit like a dick in comparison. While he didn’t know Ranboo well enough to allow him to use his personal name, he could grant one thing.

“You can just say Orpheus. If it’s not in a formal setting I don’t mind if you don’t use my title,” Wilbur told him, swallowing down the lump in his throat. “Anyway, uh, I’m alright. You know how it is.”

There was a moment where Ranboo seemed to be in shock over Wilbur giving him permission to not use his title, but after a few seconds, he shook himself out of it. “Are you sure? Because I know things weren’t great the other day.”

Right. Because Tommy had told Ranboo all about their argument.

“It’s fine,” Wilbur told him, even though things with Tommy were certainly not fine. “We’re working stuff out.”

Ranboo’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wait, really? Have you guys come to a compromise on things?”

Wilbur was acutely aware of Jack Manifold standing only a few feet away. Even though he was against the wall and not outright eavesdropping, he could still hear everything he and Ranboo were saying, which meant that even if he could trust Ranboo, he wouldn’t be talking about something like this out in the middle of the hallway.

The thought made annoyance flash through him. Ranboo was really oblivious to the concept of secrecy, wasn’t he?

“You could say that,” Wilbur said, side-eyeing Jack. “It’s nothing to worry about, Ranboo. Shit like that happens with siblings, you know?”

Ranboo’s gaze followed Wilbur’s side eye, and he let out a soft breath of realization, as if he was only just now noticing Jack standing nearby. He was silent for a moment, eyes darting between Jack and Wilbur, before he ducked down towards Wilbur’s ear.

“Tommy really doesn’t like you two not being on the same side of this,” Ranboo whispered. “I know he might seem mad, but it’s also stressing him out a lot.”

For a moment, Wilbur wanted to snap back at Ranboo that he knew that already. That Tommy was *his* brother, and he could damn well tell that he hated disagreeing with Wilbur on something as important as this. Sure, they didn’t have the same opinion on everything, but when it came to politics Tommy had always trusted Wilbur’s point of view. That didn’t mean he would always blindly follow his advice—he was never afraid to question why Wilbur said the things he said—but he recognized that Wilbur had studied more on these kinds of things than he did. Not to mention, most of their viewpoints aligned anyway, so it wasn’t like it was ever an issue for them not to agree on political matters.

Wilbur was well-aware that it took a lot for Tommy to tell Wilbur he thought they should join the Empire. That was something that Wilbur couldn’t brush aside. It was a sign that they were breaking Tommy. Wearing him down little by little. Wilbur had to stand strong against it. Had to keep his tower from crumbling or else Tommy would drown right beside him. But it was so, *so* hard to keep himself upright, let alone keep Tommy’s head above water as well.

He wanted to tell Ranboo that he knew all this. That he knew Tommy better than Ranboo ever would. That Ranboo had no right to talk to him like he couldn't read his own brother.

But he was trying to listen, right? And maybe Ranboo didn't mean it in a condescending way. Maybe he was just genuinely worried about Tommy and wanted to offer what information he could to help Wilbur fix him.

Wilbur didn't believe that for a second. But it was what he told himself over and over again as he forced down the bitterness rising up his throat, nodding at Ranboo instead.

"I know," Wilbur said, keeping his voice low. "Trust me, Ranboo. I know."

Ranboo stared at him for a moment, eyebrows furrowed and mouth opening and closing as if he was unsure of what to say next. After a moment, his face softened into something almost pained, and he whispered, "Then why do you keep doing this to him?"

And that-

That's not what Wilbur expected him to ask.

He almost stumbled back in surprise at the question. Why was he doing this? Did he really phrase it like Wilbur had a choice in the matter?

"I'm doing what I can to protect him," Wilbur hissed, his pretenses of politeness burning away. "I'm protecting our planet. Our *home*."

"But... isn't it technically Tommy's planet? Since he's the heir?" Ranboo asked quietly. "Shouldn't he be the one making the decisions about what happens to it?"

It was the first time Wilbur had heard a question like that said in a completely sincere way. There was no mocking in his tone. This wasn't a cruel jab at Wilbur's illegitimate status. Ranboo was genuinely asking him this.

That didn't mean the words didn't slide through his ribs like a knife.

"Tommy is fifteen years old," Wilbur reminded him, the bite in his words fading as an ache grew in his chest. "He's a child, and doesn't have the skillset yet to make these kinds of decisions."

"And you do?" Ranboo questioned.

"I might not be an expert, but I have several more year's worth of studying on this than my brother does, so I'd say that gives me at least some level of accreditation," Wilbur said, his whispered voice cracking. "I'm trying to do what I think is best here, and while Tommy might not like it, I'm going to keep trying until I can't anymore. And whether you think I'm right or wrong for doing that really isn't any of your business, Ranboo."

At this, Ranboo curled in on himself like he was trying to hide from Wilbur's piercing glare. "I'm sorry, I didn't- I didn't mean to come off like I was attacking you."

“Well you did a pretty shit job of it,” Wilbur huffed, although his anger was fading as he took in the kicked puppy look taking center stage on Ranboo’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo apologized again. “That came out really wrong. I know you’re just trying to do what you know.”

And now Wilbur saw he had a choice. He could make another sharp comment at Ranboo. Could storm off and leave the boy shaking like a leaf, curled in on himself like he was waiting to be scolded.

Wilbur didn’t feel bad for Ranboo. He didn’t have to push his way into business that wasn’t his own. He had no right to try and pass judgement on Wilbur for his choices in this situation.

But at the same time, if Tommy was right and Ranboo really was a genuine person at heart... this could be him trying to be a good friend. He knew that Tommy was upset over Wilbur’s refusal to compromise, and he had made it clear he didn’t want Tommy to be upset. Maybe he’d thought that hearing it from Ranboo might make Wilbur more willing to listen, even if he was dead wrong about that.

His paranoia was twisting his thoughts into dark clouds he could barely even recognize as his own. Every minute expression, every half-sentence, every stutter was something his mind would catalogue as evidence against the person. Could he really not trust Ranboo, or was his suspicion just getting the better of him? Tommy cared about him for a reason. Did Wilbur trust his own sense of judgement more than Tommy’s?

Did Wilbur even trust himself anymore?

He had no answer to that.

The foundations under his pillar cracked a little bit more.

“I should get going back to my room,” Wilbur muttered, the anger having drained out of him as quickly as it had arrived. “I’ll see you later, Ranboo.”

His voice was flat. Dejected. It was a stranger’s voice coming out of his own mouth.

“Oh, uh, okay then. Are you okay?”

What a stupid question.

Wilbur didn’t respond as he turned back down the hallway, Jack having to hurry to keep up the pace with him. He listened for footsteps behind them. To try and see if Ranboo was going to follow him and give him more of a headache than he already had.

There was nothing. Wilbur told himself it was a relief.

Once he got back to his room, Wilbur saw that Tommy still wasn’t back from training yet. He sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling off his shoes before bringing his knees up to his chest, and resting his chin on top of them.

The weight on his shoulders was crushing him. Every breath was a struggle. Every decision he had to make was another crack in the stone.

If his foundation crumbled all the way-

If the waves battered at him over and over until he broke apart into a dozen pieces-

If his pillar sunk to the bottom of the ocean where no light could reach it-

Would the inscription at the base of the pillar read, *Ozymandias*?

Wait, no, it wouldn't. Ozymandias had a kingdom once. Even if they didn't exist anymore, at one point in life, at one point in time, Ozymandias had something to his name.

Wilbur had nothing. The inscription at the base of his pillar would be blank.



That night at dinner, Wilbur was picking at his food, and Tommy was chatting excitedly to Aimsey and Ranboo.

Tommy hadn't finished his training session with Technoblade until right before dinner was set to start. He was covered in sweat, and only exchanged a few words with Wilbur before he was rushing into the bathroom to take a fast shower. Wilbur, who had been curled around his pillow on the bed and staring at the wall, didn't even look up.

Now they were at dinner. Tommy was telling Aimsey and Ranboo about all the cool new moves Technoblade taught him, because apparently Technoblade had decided to teach Tommy how to throw knives today. Wilbur listened, wanting to know how things were going between him and Technoblade, but he wasn't offering any commentary of his own.

It was as if all the energy had been sucked out of him. The effort it took to lift his fork to his mouth alone was enough to make him want to curl up in his bed and never climb out. But thankfully, Tommy didn't seem to notice.

"It was so fucking cool guys. I was just staring at this target that was *so* far away, and I totally didn't think I was gonna hit it. But the Technoblade showed me how to hold the knife properly, adjusted my arm a bit, and when I threw it it landed right in the center!"

"Holy shit, that's so cool!" Aimsey exclaimed.

"That's really awesome, Tommy. It took me so long to get the hang of throwing knives, and even then I'm still not very good at it," Ranboo told him, his hands folding on the table in front of him.

"Oh Ranboo, we gotta have a competition sometime. See who can get the most-"

"Seems we meet again."



Tommy was cut off by a new voice appearing behind them, and Wilbur had to fight the urge to groan as he shifted around in his seat to face the newcomer.

Quackity was standing behind both his and Tommy's chairs, arms folded over his chest and gemstone tooth shimmering like a prism as the lights above reflected off of it. Wilbur clenched his jaw when he met Quackity's eyes, remembering what Philza had said about him earlier that day. The mystery that surrounded his reason for being here.

"I would say it's a pleasure to see you again, but it's not," Wilbur said, meeting Quackity's gaze coolly.

Beside him, Tommy choked. "Wh- Wilbur, what the fuck? Who is this guy?"

Before Wilbur could explain his run-in with Quackity earlier that day, Quackity was holding out a hand for Tommy to shake, tattoos rippling over his skin with the movement. "Name's Quackity. I work with Phil sometimes," he explained, flashing Tommy a sharp grin. "Prince Orpheus and I met earlier today."

Tommy frowned, glancing between Wilbur and Quackity for a moment, no doubt taking notice of the sour expression that had crossed Wilbur's face. After a beat of hesitation, he reached out to take Quackity's hand, and shook it quickly before pulling away.

"Uh, you can call me Theseus," Tommy introduced, still looking confused. "Is there, like, shit going on between you two or something?"

Again, before Wilbur could say anything, Quackity jumped in to explain.

"Yeah, that's actually what I came over here to talk about. Prince Orpheus, I wanted to apologize for getting off on the wrong foot," Quackity said, turning to face Wilbur. "Definitely sounded like more of a dick than I meant to when we met earlier."

Wilbur raised a doubtful eyebrow at that. "Are you telling me that calling us strays wasn't supposed to be an insult?"

Quackity chuckled. "Oh, it was. But I just realized that was kind of an asshole move on my end to have that be the first thing I say to you."

"Yeah, no shit," Wilbur muttered.

"I'm just saying, I don't want there to be any bad blood between us since I'm gonna be hanging around here for the next few weeks," Quackity said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

That was bullshit. It had to be. Either someone had told Quackity that Wilbur was the one acting as Tommy's advisor, so he wanted to be on Wilbur's good side so he could influence possible business decisions regarding blaziphane, or there was some even more sinister ulterior motive to the apology.

No matter what though, Wilbur had put enough pieces together to figure out that Quackity was a businessman. He wasn't blind to the fact that Tommy was sitting at the head of the

wealthiest planet in the galaxy. There was blood in the water, and Quackity was sniffing it out.

“Quackity, do me a favor and stay away from me and my brother,” Wilbur said, his words sharp enough to cut through stone.

Quackity’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, while Tommy frowned.

“Wil, c’mon, chill the fuck out,” Tommy said, straightening up in his seat.

“Tommy, don’t.”

Something in Wilbur’s voice must’ve made Tommy decide to stop arguing, because he snapped his mouth shut and scowled at him before he turned back to his food. Quackity, meanwhile, was still grinning as if nothing had gone wrong.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness. I’m not looking to start shit,” Quackity told him, holding his hands up in mock surrender.

“Well it’s too late for that, so can you please let us finish our meal in peace?” Wilbur asked, staring Quackity down.

They locked eyes, and a beat of silence passed between them. Wilbur could see a range of emotions swirling through Quackity’s dark gaze. Amusement, curiosity, and annoyance all rolled into one. Wilbur was almost satisfied when frustration was added to the mix.

“Alright then, don’t need to be told twice. I’ll see you guys around,” Quackity said, taking a step back and waving to both of them before he turned on his heel and left the dining hall.

Wilbur watched him go, noticing the way the birds embroidered along his pants seemed to almost move with every shift in the fabric. The thread glittered in such a way that it created the illusion of flapping wings as the light hit different parts of it, and Wilbur had to admit, that was some very fine craftsmanship.

As soon as he was gone, Wilbur turned back to his plate, thinking of how utterly unappetizing his meal was after seeing Quackity.

“Okay, who the fuck was that?” Was the first thing Tommy asked as soon as Wilbur tuned back into the conversation.

“That’s Quackity. He’s a business associate of Phil and Techno’s,” Ranboo told him, wringing his hands together. “Techno, um, doesn’t really like him all that much. And he doesn’t like Techno either. But he’s been working with them both for a while now, so I guess they get along on some things.”

“I’ve never seen him around here before,” Aimsey pointed out, dark brows scrunched together.

“Yeah, he doesn’t come by too often. Sometimes he’s only here for a day, other times he’ll stay for months. It’s pretty random,” Ranboo explained.

“What’s he here for though?” Tommy asked, glancing back at the archway leading out of the dining hall. “Like, what kind of business stuff does he even do?”

To Wilbur’s disappointment, Ranboo shrugged at this. “I’m not sure, honestly. Techno hasn’t told me much, and Phil doesn’t really go into detail either.”

“That’s fucking weird,” Tommy muttered, slumping back in his seat.

“Yeah, he’s interesting for sure,” Ranboo said quietly, picking up his fork again.

And that was the end of that conversation. After that, Tommy resumed talking about his knife throwing, while Wilbur stewed over his food in silence. Not even Ranboo seemed to know what the deal with Quackity was. Or if he did, he wasn’t allowed to say what was going on behind the scenes. Once again, that raised far more questions than it answered, and Wilbur knew this was going to drive him mad sooner or later.

Once they finished their meal, the walk back to their room was silent. Wilbur had barely gotten the chance to talk to Tommy all day, and the quiet pressed down on every side of him, making it difficult to breathe once again.

After bidding goodbye to Jack, the door to their room slid shut behind them, and the pressure only got more intense.

“So what the fuck was up with you and Quackity?” Tommy asked as soon as they were alone.

And-

Wilbur knew he should explain all of his suspicions. He knew he should lay out everything Quackity said to him, and everything Philza told him, and his suspicions about the timing of Quackity’s arrival.

But he was so tired. So unbelievably tired of everything.

Every day it was something new. Every day the pressure got worse. Every day more broken pieces of himself fell into an unforgiving sea, never to be seen again.

“What do you care?” Wilbur asked, not looking at Tommy as he shrugged his coat off and sat on the edge of the bed.

Tommy blinked. “What do you mean, ‘what do I care?’ I wanna know why you were telling him to leave us alone!”

“Would you even believe me if I explained my thoughts?” Wilbur asked, giving Tommy a tired look. “Or would you just say I’m being paranoid again?”

Realization washed over Tommy, his bright eyes going wide as his face softened.

“Wil, c’mon, don’t be like that. I wanna know what’s going on.”

This was childish and Wilbur knew it, but he was too tired to be anything but.

“I just don’t see the fucking point if you’re going to dismiss everything I say,” Wilbur snapped, wrapping his arms around himself. “If you want to know, I don’t trust Quackity. I have my reasons, but you’re just going to remind me I don’t trust anyone.”

“That’s unfair. Yes, I think you’re overly-paranoid about some things. But that doesn’t mean I don’t wanna hear what you think!” Tommy tried to argue.

Wilbur scoffed, stretching out on the bed and turning his back to Tommy. “Yeah, well I don’t wanna hear what I have to say, so how’s that?”

The truth was bitter on his lips as it spilled out into the air. Wilbur didn’t want to hear his own thoughts out loud, because it would only confirm what was already lurking in his mind. His thoughts were illogical. His paranoia was unfounded. His reasoning wasn’t sound.

Silence weighed heavily between them, crackling against Wilbur’s skin like electricity. There were a few beats where Tommy didn’t do anything, and then the lights were being turned off, and there was the sound of shuffling as Tommy changed into his pajamas. Then, the bed dipped as Tommy crawled in next to him, and Wilbur expected the silence to continue.

Instead, there was a warm hand grabbing his shoulder, trying to turn him over. Wilbur resisted at first, but after a few seconds, he sighed and let Tommy roll him onto his other side so they were facing each other.

“Something’s wrong,” was the first thing Tommy said as soon as they were eye to eye.

Wilbur huffed. “Yeah, no shit something’s wrong. There’s a lot fucking wrong right now.”

“No, I mean there’s something wrong with you,” Tommy specified, his eyes boring into Wilbur’s. “You’re not acting like yourself. You haven’t been for a while now.”

“That tends to happen when you’re put into a life or death situation,” Wilbur pointed out. “I know I’ve been a dick lately, but I’m more than a little stressed out right now, so maybe lay the fuck off.”

Tommy’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, no shit you’re stressed. But I’m stressed too and you don’t see me acting like a complete asshole.”

“I get it, I’m a terrible damn person. Can I go the fuck to sleep now?” Wilbur asked, his patience wearing thin.

“No, you can’t. I’m trying to help you, but you’re not letting me in, and it’s really starting to piss me off.”

“I don’t need your help,” Wilbur hissed.

There was a beat of silence as Tommy stared at him, glowing freckles casting spotted light on the sheets beneath his head. Then, he was reaching forward, and Wilbur shuddered when Tommy rested a hand on his cheek.

“Please, I’m right here, Wil. Fucking *talk* to me,” Tommy pleaded.

And-

Wilbur was tempted. He was so tempted. The hand on his cheek was warm, soothing something aching inside of him that he hadn't even known was there. Tommy's whisper echoed around the room, wrapping Wilbur up in reassurances he didn't deserve. Telling him that he could spill out all his terrible, jagged thoughts and anxieties and his brother would listen. That he would be there to help Wilbur put the pieces of himself back together.

But that was a burden that was far too heavy for anyone to carry. No one deserved to have that job thrust on them, least of all Tommy.

Tears burned in Wilbur's eyes as he moved Tommy's hand off his face and rolled over so he was facing away from his little brother. Behind him, he heard a soft sigh, followed by more shuffling as Tommy turned his back to him as well.

*Good. He needed to stop caring.*

The ache in Wilbur's chest was blinding. His cheek burned where Tommy had touched it. When was the last time he'd hugged his little brother? He couldn't even remember at this point.

Despite his exhaustion, Wilbur was once again plagued with his familiar foe of insomnia. He stared at the wall, anxiety buzzing through him as nausea crept up the back of his throat. Behind him, Tommy's breathing slowed, and it wasn't long before he could tell that Tommy had fallen asleep.

If Tommy woke up and Wilbur was gone again, he would be more than upset. One wrong step could shatter the entire bridge between them, and Wilbur knew he needed to be careful not to destroy the little they had left.

Wilbur knew this. He knew this as a fact. But he couldn't bring himself to care as he climbed out of bed anyway.

Everything inside of him was numb as he padded towards the door. He glanced back at Tommy, the ache returning when he saw the glowing freckles illuminating his peaceful, sleeping face.

Then, he opened the door to the room, and left without a sound.

Wilbur wasn't sure where he was going this time. He wandered the corridors, cold seeping from the stone floor and through his socks, making a shudder run down his spine. Through the windows that lined some of the palace halls, Wilbur could see the ice above their heads lit up in soft shades of blue and white. The city was still abuzz with life, and Wilbur pressed a hand to the chilly glass, wondering what their lives were like out there. They didn't have to make decisions that affected entire planets. One wrong step for one of them only meant a mistake was made. One wrong step for someone like Wilbur could send the entire galaxy toppling over.

"I'm beginning to think you have some kind of chronic insomnia problem, mate."

The familiar voice should've made dread curl around Wilbur's gut. It should've settled over his shoulders like an unwelcome weight and made him shudder with fear. It should've been something he didn't want to hear.

Wilbur couldn't bring himself to care though as Philza's shoulder brushed his own.

"I'm not really in the mood for any more vague threats or whatever the fuck you want to say to me tonight," Wilbur said, keeping his gaze fixed on the city.

Philza hummed, unbothered by his harsh tone. "That's understandable. You definitely seem more exhausted than usual."

"I'm sure you're happy about that," Wilbur muttered, bitterness dripping from his words. "If I'm tired, I fuck up more. If I fuck up, you have a better chance at getting what you want."

"Nah, I think that makes the whole game of it less fun," Philza told him, wings brushing against Wilbur's back.

Wilbur was silent. He wasn't sure if he believed Philza or not.

"You haven't left the palace since you arrived here, have you?" Philza then asked.

Wilbur blinked, not having expected a question like that. "No, obviously I haven't."

There was a beat as Philza considered this, tapping his talons along the arms folded over his chest.

"Would you like to see something cool?"

Turning to face Philza, Wilbur frowned at him. "Am I going to say yes and then you're going to take me to an executioner's block or some shit?"

A startled laugh erupted from Philza, and he tilted his head back as the sound echoed down the palace walls. "No, it's nothing like that. Trust me, if I wanted to execute you, I wouldn't need to trick you about it."

Well... that was strangely reassuring.

"Fine. Lead the way," Wilbur relented, figuring there was no point in saying no.

Flashing him a grin, Philza turned on his heel and headed down the hallway. Wilbur followed, their footsteps bouncing off the walls and making it sound like there were more than two of them walking. He suppressed his shudders though, and let Philza lead him down the twists and turns, and it didn't take long for Wilbur to realize where Philza was taking him.

"Why are you taking me to the train platform?" He asked, not having been there since he and Tommy first arrived at the palace.

"Call it a field trip," Philza shrugged, still smiling as he picked up the pace.

A few minutes later, they arrived on the platform. Unlike before when it had been buzzing with people, now it was almost completely empty. There was a single train car sitting on the tracks, all the lights shut off with a guard standing near the doors. When she spotted Philza and Wilbur, she immediately straightened up like she'd been shocked, and bowed stiffly at both of them in greeting.

"Your Majesty, you're here for the train?" She asked, her uniform shimmering in the dim lights of the platform.

"Yes, I am. We're going to Cave Four," he told her.

She blinked in surprise, but nodded quickly as she pressed a button to open the doors of the train. The guard stepped inside and Philza followed, gesturing for Wilbur to come as well.

Maybe Wilbur should've hesitated. Maybe he shouldn't have been so cavalier about leaving the palace he'd been staying in for over a month now without Tommy by his side. Maybe Wilbur shouldn't have agreed to go with Philza in the first place.

But Wilbur's thoughts were hazy with exhaustion, his logic dulled by the endless cycle of anxiety and anger that was every waking moment on Zephyr IV. So he didn't think twice as he stepped through the train doors, and he also didn't hesitate to settle down next to Philza on the narrow seats.

The guard nodded at them once before she was hurrying up to the front of the small train car. She typed a few things into a holo-panel, and then the train jolted, lights flickering on as it began to move down the track.

They pulled away from the palace platform and back onto that grand track that overlooked the entire city. Even though he had long since grown used to the view from inside the walls of the palace, it was still something else to behold on the train itself. Wilbur pressed his hand against the window, staring in awe at the glittering metal spires. Beside him, he heard Philza quietly chuckle, but chose to ignore it in favor of watching the train pass over the city.

Soon, the train switched tracks and began to descend onto a lower level. The city buildings were closer now, and Wilbur could make out mostly empty streets. There were a few people here and there walking between the towering buildings, but at this time of night they were few and far between. Softly glowing lights were strung up between the different buildings, with a few orbs floating on their own, and it gave the entire city a surprisingly warm atmosphere for how cold and intimidating the architecture was.

Then, the buildings began to spread out. Looking forward, Wilbur saw they were heading straight into one of the tunnels that ran into the wall of the ice cavern, and up close Wilbur could see the ice wall was made up of thousands of ridged lines stacked on top of each other. A sign that it was a natural cave formation then?

The city disappeared behind them as they rode into the tunnel. Things were dark for a few moments, before the tunnel quickly opened up again into another cavern. This one was much smaller than the main cavern, but it was still bigger than what Wilbur was expecting, and he saw there were even more tunnels branching off as the train rails ran down each one.

The train made a sharp turn down one of the smaller tunnels. It was only another few seconds of darkness before it opened up to a single cave, with the railway hitting a dead end in the center of it.

The car came to a complete stop right before it hit the end of the track. Philza stood up, the tip of his wing smacking Wilbur in the face where he was still sitting down. The doors hissed as they slid open, and the guard nodded at Philza before stepping out first.

After a few moments she gave a thumb's up, and Philza gestured for Wilbur to get out of his seat.

The second they stepped out of the train car, Wilbur was practically blasted in the face with icy air. He shivered, wrapping his arms around himself and cursing the fact that he was wearing nothing but thin pajamas. But then he took a few more steps away from the car, and quickly forgot about the cold as he took in the cave they had rode into.

It was small. Much smaller than the earlier caverns they had passed through. This one was probably only a bit larger than the dining hall, with walls of ice curving up over their heads and interspersed with pieces of sheet metal drilled into it. The ice itself was made up of rather stunning blue and white swirls, the colors twisting together in a way that was completely indescribable, but beautiful all the same.

The guard stayed by the train car as Philza led him deeper into the cave. There were a few floating lights keeping the place from being completely dark, but it was hard to see the further away from the train car they got.

Along with the sheet metal, there was also stone embedded into the ice. Walls of craggy, grey stone that had chunks taken out of it, a few stray rocks still littering the glacial floor. The cave was empty save for him, Philza, and the guard, and Wilbur had a feeling this was the first time in years it had seen visitors.

"What is this place?" Wilbur asked, whispering even though there was no reason to.

"It was one of the first caves we dug out of the ice," Philza explained, pointing at the stone. "Zephys IV is almost completely made of ice, but there's huge deposits of stone and ore between the ice itself. We try to find those stone pockets and mine them out to get the minerals inside."

Reaching out, Wilbur ran his fingers along the ice, wincing at how cold it was against his fingertips. The stone was only somewhat warmer than the ice, with craggy chunks catching his skin and making him pull away out of fear that he might cut open his hand.

"Come here," Philza said, moving further away from the train car.

Wilbur followed, still staring at the walls in awe. The lighting above their heads shifted from shades of white to a bright blue, and Wilbur wasn't sure why until Philza tapped his shoulder and pointed to the ceiling. Looking up, Wilbur gasped.



The ceiling was covered in glowing blue stars. They were embedded in the ice itself, shimmering in a way that reminded Wilbur of his own freckles, stretched far across the ceiling and deeper into the cave. Some of the stars trailed onto the walls as well, stopping right at the edge where the stone met the ice.

It was one of the most beautiful things Wilbur had ever seen.

“Bioluminescence,” Philza explained, the blue light casting a soft glow over his face. “Bacteria that were frozen in this ice thousands and thousands of years ago just naturally glow like this. One of the ways we would find stone pockets was by looking for the glow, because the bacteria always tend to cluster close to the deposits.”

“It’s amazing,” Wilbur whispered, wondering if his own freckles matched the constellations in the ice.

“I had a feeling you’d like it, little bird,” Philza chuckled.

Wilbur’s eyes shifted away from the stars above his head, and down towards the walls. His gaze drifted past the glowing ice and back to the stone, where he noticed some markings embedded in the grey rock that he hadn’t seen before.

Narrowing his eyes, Wilbur stepped closer. Although it was difficult to make out in the dim lighting, he realized it was words—names specifically, carved into the stone in a towering list.

“The miners carved their names into the wall here when they got close to the end of the stone deposit,” Philza told him.

“How long ago was this cave shut down?” Wilbur asked.

A pause.

Then,

“A long time ago.”

Huh. That made sense, but Wilbur wasn’t sure why Philza had seemed hesitant to tell him that.

His eyes drifted along the names, not expecting to recognize any of them. Only some were written in common, while the majority were written in languages he didn’t know. As he read the different markings though, his eyes caught on one name, and his breathing hitched.

*Puffy*

Was... Was that a coincidence? That one of the miners had the same name as the Captain of the Royal Guard?

Wilbur wasn’t sure. But then his eyes caught on another name.

Some of the names were unreadable because the stone had crumpled, leaving only a letter or two behind. This was one of those names. It sat right underneath Puffy's, with the majority of the stone it had been written on having been knocked out of the wall.

All that was left of it was the first letter.

*P*

As Wilbur straightened back up, he felt a dark wing rest over his shoulders, blocking out the chill that had threaded itself under his shirt. And although he wanted to push it away... he didn't.

The ache in his chest was unbearable.

## Chapter End Notes

QUACKITY IS HERE FINALLYYYYYY i know a bunch of you guys were missing him! he is here and he is up to Stuff. love him. my boy.

I really hope you guys enjoyed the chapter!! did not expect it to be this long. again, we're going pretty slow paced with the buildup and relationships and all that. I wanna take my time with this to make sure I get it right :)

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below!! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3

ok that's all! I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist i have for this fic [here!](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# bruises blooming under fists

## Chapter Summary

The Themisians.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone i'm back!!

I'm sorry that my schedule with this has become so erratic. I thought it was only a one or two time thing, but considering I'm writing extremely long chapters these days (this one is over 10k words) I feel like it makes up for the slightly longer wait between chapter updates. on the plus side, I finally finished my summer classes! on the down side, now I'm a real adult with a college degree who needs to get a job. i'm terrified.

ANYWAY thank you all so much for all the love this fic has received so far. hope you guys enjoy this one, it's definitely a fun one

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Usually, if Wilbur spent the day hidden away in the library, there were very few people that tended to bother him. Jack would appear every so often to remind him about mealtime or if he had been summoned by someone, or Tommy might run in with Aimsey and Ranboo trailing behind—although that was far less common these days.

But otherwise, the library was his private space. Not as private as his room of course, but it was the closest thing he could find to a place of solace in the palace during the day. He could huddle up in the corner with a history book on his lap, and for at least a few hours, the storm in his mind would reach a lull. Not enough to actually stop the storm altogether, but it was a breather, and that was better than nothing.

Which was why he nearly jumped out of his skin when one day, he found himself with some very unwelcome company.

“Huh. Didn’t expect to see you here,” Technoblade said as soon as he stepped through the door, golden eyes quickly finding Wilbur sequestered in the far corner.

Wilbur, who had been skimming a text on Floslium, fought the urge to flinch. “I can leave,” he offered, straightening up in his chair.

To his disappointment, Technoblade shook his head. “Nah, that’s fine. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Dammit. Wilbur wouldn’t be able to focus on his book with the fucking Imperator sitting only a few feet away from him.

Still, he kept his mouth shut as Technoblade grabbed a holo-pad off one of the desks and settled himself down a few chairs over from Wilbur’s own. Despite the fact that he’d left plenty of space between the two of them, Wilbur could feel his presence like electric currents running over his skin, and he wanted nothing more than to run out of the library and back to his room.

Technoblade didn’t say anything as he rested the holo-pad against his legs, tapping a few buttons to pull up whatever book he wanted to read. Wilbur stared at him through his fringe, wondering what the Imperator was playing at here.

Was this some new kind of power play? A reminder that Wilbur couldn’t have his own space anywhere in the palace? Or was he trying to keep an eye on Wilbur? Maybe he wanted to find out what he was reading, and was going to check the history of the holo-pad after Wilbur left. Although it’s not like that would do them any good. He doubted Technoblade and Philza would get much use out of the fact that he was reading a book on the history of Floslium’s government.

As the questions bounced around Wilbur’s head, Technoblade shifted in his seat, and Wilbur stiffened. But then, Technoblade settled down again, and Wilbur realized he’d just been readjusting to get more comfortable.

He glanced back down at the holo-pad in front of him. The words blurred together, impossible to process as he kept thinking about the piglin sitting so close to him. What was he thinking? Why wasn’t Tommy with him? Of course Tommy was probably off with Ranboo and Aimsey, but considering he spent nearly every day with Technoblade there had to be some reason the two of them weren’t training together right now.

His eyes darted back up. He watched Technoblade through his dark curls, trying to get inside his head. If he was in Technoblade’s shoes, why would he be in the library? Maybe it had nothing to do with him. Maybe the Imperator just wanted to read-

No. That couldn’t be it. He was sure Technoblade could have a holo-pad in his own room loaded with every book on the planet if he wanted it. This had to be a move. Wilbur just couldn’t figure out what the goal of it was.

“Y’know, if you take a picture it’ll last longer.”

Wilbur jumped at the sound of Technoblade’s deep voice, before scrambling to school his face back into one of neutrality.

“Excuse me?” He asked, properly lifting his head to look at Technoblade now.

Technoblade raised a single pink eyebrow at him. “You’re staring at me. You should just take a picture at this point.”

“I wasn’t staring at you,” Wilbur lied.

“Trust me, you’re not as subtle as you think,” Technoblade told him. “You can keep staring if you want, but nothing’s gonna change. I’m just here to read.”

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. He wanted to ask Technoblade why he was here, and what he was playing at with this. That’s what he would’ve done if Philza pulled this move.

But Technoblade wasn’t Philza. At this point, he and Philza had reached a kind of... understanding. He knew Philza didn’t care about him being upfront, and actually preferred honesty to lies meant to put up a facade. But when it came to Technoblade, Wilbur didn’t know how he’d react to something like that. The last time he was blunt with him, the Imperator had tackled him to the ground and pressed a knife to his throat. Wilbur had no desire to repeat that experience anytime soon.

It was going to be impossible to just sit here in silence though. Wilbur had to say something. Anything to try and get an idea of what Technoblade was doing.

“What are you reading?” Wilbur found himself asking, the words slipping out of his mouth without thought.

A beat passed. Wilbur clenched his jaw.

Then,

“A book on the mythology of Themis,” he answered, his gaze fixed on the holo-pad.

“Themis?” Wilbur questioned, raising an eyebrow. “Why are you reading about Themis?”

Technoblade shrugged. “Phil told you he was trying to contact the Themisians, right?” Wilbur nodded. “Well, we’ve just been talkin’ about them a lot so I’ve been trying to do a bit of research on their culture. The little bits of mythology I’ve heard seem pretty interesting, so...” he trailed off, holding the holo-pad up for a moment before setting it back down on his lap.

Well, Wilbur supposed that made sense. But-

“How do you even have a book on Themisian mythology?”

Unlike most of the other planets in the galaxy, Themis was not one that openly shared its history and accomplishments with everyone else. It was closed off. In order to visit the planet, you either needed to be a diplomat invited there by the Royal Family, or you had to go through the arduous process of getting a visa approval which was said to be next to impossible if you didn’t have any Themisian blood in you.

The only reason Wilbur knew as much about Themis as he did was thanks to Niki. The ambassadors were reluctant to teach him anything about the planet his mother came from, but

unlike him, Niki was a full-blooded siren. So the ambassadors would regularly pull her away for private tutoring sessions on its history.

The fact that Technoblade claimed to have a book on Themisian mythology in his hands right at that moment... it was unusual to say the least.

At the question, Technoblade simply shrugged again. "We have our ways."

That was ominous. The fact that Technoblade wasn't going into detail implied that he hadn't gotten the book through normal methods. If Wilbur had to take a guess, he'd say it was possibly smuggled off the planet and sold through a black market. Something of that sort.

Which also begged another question.

"Is that translated into Common?" Wilbur asked, knowing that most Themisian texts were written in Royal Themisian for the sole purpose of making them unreadable to outsiders.

"You sure ask a lot of questions," Technoblade muttered, although he didn't look as annoyed as his words made him sound. "Yes, it's translated, but it's not perfect. There are sections of it that weren't able to be translated, so I'm just kinda skipping over those."

Wilbur blinked. He could stay silent. He could hum and go back to his book, accepting that that wasn't his problem. He really didn't give a shit if Technoblade was able to read a book on Themisian mythology. It literally didn't affect him at all, and offering to help was just going to make Technoblade think he liked him or something, which certainly wasn't the case.

But... Wilbur was curious about what the book said.

Fuck.

Sighing, Wilbur pushed out of his seat and walked over to Technoblade's chair. "Give me an untranslated section," he said, holding his hand out for the holo-pad.

Glancing up, Technoblade furrowed his brows. "You know Royal Themisian?"

"I'm shit at speaking it, but I can read it decently well," Wilbur explained, hand still outstretched.

A moment passed as Technoblade stared at him, clearly debating whether or not to give him the holo-pad. Then, after a few beats, he relented and handed it over.

Looking down at the text, Wilbur read the passage in his head, furrowing his brows as he tried to figure out how to read it in Common. It wasn't a particularly difficult passage to read, and it was actually a myth he already knew, but it leaned very heavily into the Royal dialect as opposed to the standard Themisian that was spoken in the Capitol, so he supposed that must've been why it wasn't able to be translated.

"It says-"

“Wait,” Technoblade said, holding up a hand as he reached for the holo-pad. “Do you mind if I record you? That way we can put the translation in?”

Oh. Well, Wilbur supposed that made sense.

“That’s fine,” Wilbur nodded.

With that, Technoblade tapped a button on the side of the holo-pad, and a red blinking light appeared to indicate it was recording. Then, Wilbur took a deep breath, and began to read.

“It says, ‘the birth of the sirens is attributed to the command the Mother Myscira gave to the oceans of Themis. Using her Voice, she instructed the seafoam to create life, and the seafoam turned into the first of the sirens. Infused with the power of Myscira’s Voice, these daughters of the sea were able to channel Her Voice through themselves. Seafoam runs through the blood of a siren, and that is what grants her the ability to use Myscira’s Voice as her own. The first Queen of Themis—a siren known as Otrera—thought herself as powerful as Myscira, and wanted to use the Voice Myscira gifted her to create life herself. In her arrogance, she commanded the waves that lapped upon the black sand shores to create life, but Myscira heard this command and was upset that her daughter did not have faith in her mother. For Otrera was worried that there would not be enough sirens to live on, even though Myscira knew how to keep her daughters safe. And so, the command was followed, but Myscira hindered the waves so that the creation was flawed. The sirens that emerged from the waves were not perfect like Otrera or the others. Instead, these were sons of the ocean, and from that day forward a siren could not use the Voice to create life. That was Myscira’s punishment for her daughters.’”

Once Wilbur finished reading, he cleared his throat, and handed the holo-pad back to Technoblade. With that, Technoblade turned off the recording, and looked up at Wilbur.

“Jeez, so the existence of men is supposed to be a punishment to the women of Themis?” Technoblade asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Pretty much,” Wilbur shrugged. “Of course that’s just mythology. Scientifically speaking, Themis is well-aware sirens did not spring out of the ocean. But that was what the old beliefs said.”

Humming, Technoblade set the holo-pad back down in his lap. “Well, thanks for that. Would’ve had no way to read that otherwise.”

Letting out a slow breath, Wilbur nodded and shuffled back to his own chair. But this time, he didn’t pick up his holo-pad again to pretend to read, and Technoblade didn’t go back to reading his own either. Instead, they stared at each other, a silent standoff for... well, Wilbur wasn’t sure. Was Technoblade waiting to see if he would say something else? Or did he want Wilbur to leave?

After nearly a full minute of dead air, Technoblade finally spoke up.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Phil lately.”

Huh. Admittedly, Wilbur had not expected Technoblade to go down that route.

“It’s not exactly of my own volition,” Wilbur said, setting the holo-pad on his legs off to the side. “I can’t ignore a summons from him.”

“Visiting Cave 4 with him the other night wasn’t something he summoned you to do,” Technoblade pointed out, giving him a flat stare.

Wilbur winced. Of course Technoblade knew about that.

“Well, what else am I supposed to do when you’re taking up all of my little brother’s free time?” Wilbur challenged, trying to change the subject.

“I take it you’re not a fan of our training sessions?” Technoblade asked.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur shook his head. “No, I’m not. I don’t trust you, and I don’t trust your intentions with him.”

Despite the barb, Technoblade’s face remained impassive. “You think I’m manipulating him.”

It wasn’t a question, but Wilbur still answered it like one.

“Yes, I do. I think you’re trying to get in his head to make him trust you, and I’m not very happy about it.”

At this, Technoblade huffed, and he pushed out of his chair. Wilbur stiffened, thinking he was going to walk towards him, but instead was taken back when he realized Technoblade was turning to leave the library.

“Prince Orpheus,” Technoblade said, his back to Wilbur as he headed towards the doors, “I hate to break it to you, but it doesn’t really matter if you like it or not. Theseus is the one seeking *me* out. So if you want him to stop spending time with me, you’re gonna have to take that up with him.”

And with that, Technoblade left the library, the doors hissing as they slid shut behind him.

Now alone, Wilbur stared at the holo-pad on his lap. The chair across from him was empty, and there was no sign of life in the library save for the sound of his own breathing.

Wilbur was lucky the holo-pad didn’t break when he slammed it on the table.



Another day passed before Wilbur and Tommy received a summons.

It was becoming less common for them to be together during the day, but this was one of the rare occasions where they were both simply sitting in their room doing... well, for lack of a better word, nothing.



It had been a quiet day. Tommy had gotten back from training after only a few hours, explaining that Technoblade told him he had other business he needed to attend to. Wilbur had nodded, before going back to reading the book he had taken from the library several days before.

Things between him and Tommy were... tense. They weren't outright fighting, but ever since that night where Tommy had pleaded with Wilbur to talk to him and Wilbur refused, it was like Tommy had stopped trying to get through to him all together.

With negotiations on hold, there wasn't much left for them to talk about. It was foreign in the worst way possible. Back on Eldingvegr, Tommy would ramble to Wilbur about anything and everything, tripping over his own words as sentences tumbled out of his mouth like he had been put on two times speed. In turn, Tommy would listen to Wilbur go on and on about whatever new subject he was most interested in at the time. It was a careful balance they had spent years perfecting.

But now the balance had been thrown off. Every word shared between them was stilted, the air between them thick with disappointments and dropped expectations. It was like every time Tommy spoke, all Wilbur could hear was how badly he was failing him. A waver in his voice, a shudder running down his spine—signs that Tommy was frustrated with his older brother in a way he'd never been before.

So the two didn't speak much these days. When the summons arrived, Tommy was sitting on the bed with a holo-pad on his lap, while Wilbur did the same on the couch. The room was dead silent, so the knock at the door was startling enough to make Wilbur jump in his seat.

He got up before Tommy could, opening the doors to see Jack Manifold waiting on the other side.

"Gentlemen, the Emperor wants to see you both."

Biting back a sigh, Wilbur stepped back to grab his shoes, as he listened to Tommy shuffling off the bed and doing the same.

A few minutes later, they were following Jack down the halls. While a part of Wilbur knew his mind should be racing as he tried to figure out what they were being summoned for this time, his thoughts were strangely... still. The storm was still there, anger and sadness and frustration spinning inside his skull like a hurricane with no eye—but it was almost as if Wilbur had become so used to it, that it was just background noise. His actual thoughts were buzzing, but not with any particular idea about what was going on. Just that they were being summoned, and he would find out what it was about soon enough.

A glance to his left revealed nothing about what Tommy was thinking at that moment. His face was entirely impassive, and where Wilbur used to be able to read his little brother like a book, now he was nothing more than a blank page to him. He stared straight ahead, and Wilbur knew that it was supposed to hurt. That his chest was supposed to ache and he was supposed to long for the times when air between them wasn't so cold.

But he was just numb.

It wasn't long before they reached the throne room. Puffy was waiting for them outside, and Jack dipped his head to her before taking a step back. The brothers knew the routine, and waited for Puffy to guide them into the throne room.

There was a pause though.

"When you enter, you're only to speak Common. If you try to speak any other language, that's grounds for suspicion of conspiracy," Puffy suddenly said, her face far more serious than Wilbur had ever seen it.

"We've literally only been speaking Common since we got here," Tommy pointed out, frowning at her. "Why would anything be different now?"

Puffy tensed. "You'll understand in a minute."

And that was all the explanation they got before the doors were sliding open, and Puffy was gesturing for them to follow her inside.

Inside the throne room, Philza and Technoblade were in their usual spots. The dark black wings stretching out behind Philza's metal throne seemed glossier than usual, and both he and Technoblade were both wearing more jewelry than they usually did.

(This was almost impressive for Technoblade, considering how much gold jewelry he almost always had on him.)

Emeralds hung from both their ears, silver rings adorned Philza's fingers, and gold thread was braided into Technoblade's hair. It didn't take a genius to figure out that this was formal court attire, and Wilbur's eyes widened as he realized that this was far more formal of a summons than either of them had received in a long time.

"Prince Theseus, Prince Orpheus," Philza began, and Wilbur tried not to think of how strange it was to hear Philza say his title for the first time in so long, "apologies for the sudden call, but we weren't given much time to prepare for this."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "And what exactly is 'this'?" He asked, replying to Philza before Tommy could. "I feel like we're a little underdressed for whatever's going on."

At this, Technoblade huffed. "You have bigger things to be thinking about right now than how you're dressed."

The annoyance sputtered out in Wilbur's chest as something icy swept through him in its place.

"...what's going on?" Tommy then asked, his voice much lower than Wilbur's had been.

"You know how I told you that we've been trying to get in contact with Themis?" Philza questioned. Both Wilbur and Tommy nodded. "Well, we finally got through. We were told to be ready to call with an official from the planet as soon as possible."

Holy shit.

*Holy shit.*

Despite the tension between him and Tommy, the two of them shared an identical look of shock at the news. Puffy's warning suddenly made sense, considering both he and Tommy were able to speak Royal Themisian—albeit, not very well.

More importantly though, Wilbur hadn't been expecting Philza's attempts to actually work. Themis was closed off because they didn't care about the rest of the galaxy. If they had something to gain from working with other planets, they would. Otherwise, it wasn't something they'd bother to concern themselves with.

Most planets were content to let them be. After all, no one wanted to mess with a planet filled with people who could control someone's actions through their Voice alone.

Wilbur had assumed that Themis didn't care about Wilbur and Tommy. That because they presumably had kept the blaziphane trade arrangement with Dream, the two of them were of no concern to the planet, and therefore they wouldn't have any interest in talking to Philza.

Apparently this wasn't the case.

...wait. If Themis actually cared about him and Tommy, maybe they would have a chance. If they had Themis on their side, that would give them far more leverage than what they had before.

Hope began to bloom in Wilbur's chest for the first time in ages. It was subtle, but it was there.

It was then Wilbur noticed that there was a small disc settled on the ground a few feet in front of Philza's throne. A holo-disc, no doubt meant for formal calls like this.

"So how long until they—"

Tommy's question was cut off by a soft beeping coming from the disc on the floor. Immediately, Technoblade gestured for Wilbur and Tommy to come stand by the throne, and the two did so to ensure they were in full view of the holo-disc as it lit up.

"Intergalactic call incoming. Source: Themis. Do you accept?" A robotic female voice said, echoing out from the holo-disc.

Feathers ruffling, Philza nodded. "Yes, I accept."

The beeping cut off. Blue light got bright from the base of the disc, creating a single beam that reached the ceiling, before spreading out and scanning the room. Wilbur blinked as the scanner swept over him, and looked to his right to see Tommy flinch at the sudden light in his eyes.

Then, the scanning was done. A single beam returned, before it expanded out to form a holo-screen made up of hundreds of small, floating lights.

There was a single figure present in the hologram. She seemed young—close to Wilbur’s age. Dark hair cascaded down her shoulders in shiny curls, with deep green eyes set above a splattering of freckles over her nose—which no doubt would glow even brighter than Wilbur or Tommy’s in the dark. Along with this, her hair was partially covered by a veil made of small pearls strung together like a net. Small red flowers were twisted between the strings tying the pearls together, and a thin, gold band shaped like the leaves of a laurel wreath wrapped around her head on top of the veil. A headpiece as opulent as this no doubt signified a very high status.

“Are you receiving me?” Philza asked as soon as the hologram stopped flickering.

The woman nodded. “Yes, I am. Are you receiving me?”

Her voice was tinged with the metal that came with speaking over a holo-disc, but even with that, Wilbur could still sense power humming under her words. It was impossible for a siren to use the Voice over a call, but Wilbur could just tell that her Voice was extremely strong.

“We are receiving you,” Philza confirmed, pushing to his feet. “Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. I’m Philza, Emperor of the Antarctic Empire. And this is Technoblade, Imperator of the Antarctic Empire.”

Philza and Technoblade both bowed at her as they introduced themselves. Wilbur noticed how neither one of them introduced him or Tommy. At least not yet.

“I’m aware of who you both are,” the woman said, her tone not rude, but nothing close to kind either. “I’m Myrina Hannah, Crown Princess of Themis. My mother is preoccupied with other business, so you’ll be speaking with me on the matter you contacted us about.”

*Oh.* This was Hannah, the woman next in line for the throne to Themis. Not to mention, she was also his and Tommy’s cousin.

Wilbur didn’t miss the slight dip in her words when she said her mother was preoccupied. He thought back to the conversation he and Niki had the night before Eldingvegr was invaded. How Foolish let it slip that Queen Myrina was sick. While it was possible that she had improved and actually was dealing with other business, Wilbur knew it was far more likely that she was still ill, and Hannah was preparing to take over her duties.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Princess Myri- well, I suppose I could call you Princess Hannah, just to avoid any confusion with your mother. Is that alright?” Philza asked, sitting back down on his throne.

Even through the hologram, Wilbur didn’t miss the way Hannah’s brows twitched at this.

“No, that is not alright,” she snapped, her words low, but sharp enough to cut through stone.

“You will only refer to me as Princess Myrina, is that understood?”

...what the fuck? Did she really just speak to Philza, the ruler of the second largest Empire in the galaxy like that?

To Wilbur's surprise, Philza paled at this. He nodded, and as strange as it was, he looked... sheepish. Embarrassed as well.

That was wrong. Philza wasn't one to be spoken down to. Not with the quiet confidence that practically radiated off of him, telling everyone around him he was someone too powerful to be messed with.

"My apologies, Princess Myrina," Philza corrected, clenching his jaw.

Satisfaction flickered through Hannah's eyes, making them almost glow. "That's better," she hummed, leaning back in her seat. "Now, I've been told by my advisors that you've granted the princes of Eldingvegr asylum on Zephyr IV to protect them from Emperor Dream, is that correct?"

Philza nodded. "Yes, that is correct."

For the first time since the call began, Hannah's gaze shifted, and Wilbur straightened up when her eyes landed on him and Tommy. Philza noticed this, and gestured to both of them.

"Boys, introduce yourselves to Princess Myrina," he ordered.

Looking at Tommy, Wilbur gave him a nod, telling him to go first. But when Tommy stepped forward, Hannah spoke up.

"Shouldn't the older one go first?" She asked, furrowing her brows.

Tommy froze, eyes going wide while Wilbur's breathing hitched. There was an awkward beat of silence. Tommy shot a pleading look at Wilbur, silently asking him what to do now.

Clearing his throat, Wilbur stepped forward.

"My younger brother is the one who has the title of Crown Prince of Eldingvegr, so it's court etiquette for him to introduce himself first," he explained, before stepping back where he was.

Hannah let out a soft, almost mocking laugh at that. "I don't really care what your Eldingvegr titles dictate. By Themisian standards, you're older, so you're the one who should introduce yourself first."

Well... that was strange. But also another example of how Themis really didn't care about other planets besides their own.

Without a word, Tommy stepped back so their shoulders were brushing. Wilbur curled his hand into a fist, before forcing himself to step forward again.

"Orpheus Wilbur Soti, Prince of Eldingvegr," he introduced, bowing before straightening back up.

"Soti?" Hannah questioned.

“My Eldingvegr name,” Wilbur explained. “The late King, my younger brother’s father, gave it to me when I first arrived on the planet.”

Understanding dawned on Hannah’s face. “Ah, I see.”

With that, Wilbur took a step back, and Tommy repeated what he’d done before to introduce himself.

“I’m Theseus Thomas Ióni, Crown Prince of Eldingvegr.” His bow was deeper than Wilbur’s, although Wilbur could see how he was twisting his fingers into the hem of his jacket to try and hide his nerves.

He moved back beside Wilbur. Their shoulders were pressed tightly together, and if things weren’t so strange between them right now, Wilbur was sure Tommy would’ve grabbed his hand for reassurance.

His hand stayed empty though.

There was a beat of silence as Hannah stared at them both. Through the screen, her face was unreadable. Her eyes skimmed them up and down, something akin to curiosity settled behind the green. But curiosity might’ve been too gentle of a word for it. There was intent in the way she looked at them. Almost as if they were made of glass, and she was staring straight through them both.

“Dream has been looking for them,” Hannah said after a moment, eyes flickering back to Philza and Technoblade.

“I was told that Dream intended on executing them both,” Philza told her.

The hope in his chest sparked again. Would she be upset? She’d have to be. If Themis cared enough to call with Philza, that meant *something*. They wanted to know what was going on with him and Tommy. There was actual value placed on their lives. If Themis knew Dream intended on killing them, that didn’t bode well for Essempi.

“Yes, we were aware of his plans,” Hannah nodded, not the slightest hint of surprise on her face.

And just like that, the hope was snuffed out almost as quickly as it was lit. It was like being doused in cold water. Ice clawed up his spine and wrapped around his chest, and it took everything in his power not to wince.

Philza seemed somewhat taken back by how bluntly she said it as well. He blinked a few times before his wings stretched out again, and he shifted in his seat. “And you didn’t have a problem with that?”

“Dream’s not stupid. He contacted us before the invasion with his plans. His contact inside Eldingvegr told him about our arrangement with the planet, which I’m sure Orpheus and Theseus told you about already. He promised the blaziphane arrangement we had wouldn’t

change with his takeover, and that was really the whole reason we had the two of them on Eldingvegr in the first place,” Hannah explained, no emotion whatsoever in her words.

Beside him, Tommy was stiff. Wilbur felt like he was going to be sick.

“So you only care about the blaziphane agreement you have with Eldingvegr. Not Orpheus and Theseus?” Philza asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Pretty much. Neither one of them is anywhere near the throne in terms of succession order.”

On the other side of Philza, Wilbur could see Technoblade was frowning deeply at how casual she was about all of this. Despite Wilbur’s own conflicted feelings towards Technoblade, he had to admit, that made the ache a little less prominent.

There was a moment of silence as Philza watched the hologram, his eyes narrowed and talons tapping the arms of his chair. His eyes were like chips of ice, cold calculations running through them as he watched the siren through the screen.

“Say, from a completely hypothetical standpoint, that I were to push Essempi out of Eldingvegr and take the planet for the Antarctic Empire. If I agreed to keep whatever blaziphane agreement you already have the same as it is, would you be alright with that?”

At this, the corners of Hannah’s lips quirked up in a small smile. “You sound pretty confident in your ability to chase Essempi out like that.”

“Trust me,” Technoblade cut in, speaking up for the first time since the call began, “we can do that.”

The smile grew wider. “Well, like I said, our main concern is the blaziphane agreement. If that stays in place, we don’t really care who rules Eldingvegr.”

Philza nodded. “And the princes...?”

“Do whatever you want with the princes. They’re really not our concern,” Hannah said, waving her hand in the air.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

It wasn’t like Wilbur had expected much from Themis, but the blow was still crushing all the same. For just a moment he’d been stupid enough to let himself hope that they had a chance. That after reaching a breaking point, they finally had a leg up in their negotiations. But that wasn’t the case.

No one cared what happened to them. Not a single person.

In the end, it was the same as it always had been. Wilbur was a lonely pillar in the sea, but now his lighthouse—Tommy—had fallen into the water with him. The waves were beating at their sides, and when they both were completely swallowed by the salt and brine, no one was

going to remember they'd ever been there. Not even the other lonely pillar that had kept him upright-

Wait. Niki.

"If that's all you wanted to discuss, then I think-"

"Princess Myrina!" Wilbur interrupted, stepping right up to the holo-screen. "The Emissary to the Order of Anthemoessa—Lady Nihachu—she was imprisoned by Dream when my brother and I escaped. Was she taken back to Themis?"

*Is she there? Is Niki somewhere beyond that screen, wondering why Wilbur abandoned her?*

As if a switch had been flipped, Hannah's smile disappeared.

"The Emissary was supposed to be transported back to Themis as soon as the windy season on Eldingvegr ended," Hannah explained, her voice tight.

Wilbur felt the blood drain from his face. She was *supposed* to be transported back to Themis. But she wasn't.

"What happened?" Wilbur whispered, dread crawling up the back of his throat.

"There was a... complication," Hannah said, "the complication being that she broke out of the room she was being kept in, killed several guards, and stole a ship before flying off planet."

"What the fuck?"

Hannah huffed. "That's what I said too when I found out. She managed to escape during one of those short windows you have when the winds die down, so Dream wasn't able to follow her."

There was movement in the corner of his eye as Tommy stepped up next to him. "Where the fuck is she then?"

"We don't know," Hannah told them. "We've been trying to find her for weeks now, but she could be anywhere in the galaxy."

"Wait, can we back up? Who's Lady Nihachu?" Technoblade suddenly asked, golden eyes narrowed at Wilbur.

"Just a Themisian ambassador who was on Eldingvegr at the time of the takeover," Hannah explained, her words careful. "As she was the youngest member of the group, she was kept unaware of the invasion unlike the others."

Wow. So all the ambassadors except for Niki knew.

Fucking unbelievable.



“But if she’s Themisian, why did Dream imprison her?” Philza asked, furrowing his brows.

“Why do you care? She’s not yours to worry about, she’s a siren,” Hannah asked.

“I mean, they’re sirens too,” Technoblade pointed out, gesturing in Wilbur and Tommy’s direction.

This made Hannah scoff. “A half-siren who grew up on an entirely different planet isn’t a true Themisian,” she said, venom lacing her voice. “Consider the princes yours. They’re not Themis’ problem anymore.”

And with that, the hologram disappeared as the call was cut.

A suffocating silence fell over the room. Wilbur’s mind was racing again, thoughts of Niki buzzing around his head as he tried to think of where she could be. This whole time he’d thought that she was back on Themis. Maybe she was still on Eldingvegr, but either way, Wilbur had been holding onto hope that he would know wherever she was. But now he knew that wasn’t the case.

Niki was gone. Not even Themis knew where she was, and if they couldn’t find her, Wilbur certainly wouldn’t be able to either.

*“Do you ever think about where you would go if you didn’t have to be here?” Wilbur remembered asking late one night, while he and Niki were laying side by side on the floor of his room.*

*His voice was almost gone from all the practicing he’d done with Niki over the past hour. Still, he forced the question out, ignoring the way it scraped against his throat.*

*“What do you mean?” Niki asked, turning her head to face him.*

*The lights in his room were turned off. Both their faces were lit up by their glowing freckles, and Wilbur wondered whose were brighter.*

*“If you didn’t have to stay on Eldingvegr, and you didn’t have to go back to Themis either,” Wilbur explained. “If you were free to just... do what you want.”*

*Niki furrowed her brows, turning to look back up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. Maybe Floslium? Aimsey said it’s pretty.” She paused, pushing a strand of hair back from her face. “It would depend on who I was with though.”*

*“How so?” Wilbur asked.*

*“Well, if it was just you and me I think we could have some fun exploring places with a lot of history, like Kinoko,” Niki explained, her voice soft. “But if Tommy was with us, we’d probably wanna go somewhere with cooler stuff so he wasn’t bored the whole time.”*

*Wilbur laughed. “I think he’d like the giant mushrooms on Kinoko, but I get what you mean.” Another pause. “What if you were alone though?”*

*“Alone?” Niki questioned. Wilbur nodded, and she sighed. “I don’t think I’d want to go anywhere if I was alone. I think I’d just be too sad to enjoy anything because I’d miss you and Tommy too much.”*

*“You’re such a fucking nerd,” Wilbur teased, and Niki punched him lightly in the arm, making him laugh.*

*The laughter died down after a few moments. Wilbur considered what she said.*

*“Yeah, I get it though,” Wilbur murmured, letting his eyes flutter shut as he imagined jetting off into space with Niki and Tommy by his side. “I don’t think I’d wanna be alone either.”*

“Well, I guess you could call that a productive call,” Technoblade deadpanned, the silence clattering to the floor.

Jolted back to the present, Wilbur had to blink a few times to get his bearings as he focused back in on what Philza and Technoblade were saying.

Philza huffed. “I suppose so. We got the answers we needed at the very least.” Pushing out of his throne, he stretched out his wings behind him, the tips of his feathers reaching far enough to almost brush Wilbur’s nose. “Although now I’m wondering about this Lady Nihachu, and why neither of you have brought her up before.”

Wilbur clenched his jaw. “She wasn’t relevant to our conversations. I only asked Princess Myrina about her because I wanted to know if she was alright.”

“From what the princess said, it seems like Lady Nihachu can more than handle herself,” Technoblade commented, folding his arms over his chest.

“But I still don’t understand why Dream would imprison a Themisian,” Philza muttered, furrowing his brows.

“It’s because she tried to help us escape the first night of the invasion,” Tommy cut in.

At this, both Philza and Technoblade raised their eyebrows.

“Oh, I see,” Philza said, nodding to himself. “Yeah, that would make sense I guess.”

Technoblade’s eyes were narrowed, and Wilbur could see he had more questions. Whether they were questions about Niki, or questions about the entire interaction with Hannah in general, Wilbur wasn’t sure. Either way though, it didn’t seem like he was going to voice his thoughts just yet, which made it a moot point in the end.

“I think Techno and I need some time to discuss some things in private,” Philza suddenly said, rolling out his shoulders. “You two can go back to your room. That’s all we needed you for today.”

Wilbur didn’t bother getting worked up over how much the dismissal felt like being brushed off by a parent. His chest was aching and his head was going far too fast to handle talking to either Philza or Technoblade right now, so he was grateful for the out he was being given.

Puffy, who had been waiting by the door like a silent sentinel during the entire call, gestured for them to follow her. There was something sad lining her face—sympathy, possibly? Wilbur wasn't sure what it was, but her lips were pressed tightly together, and it almost seemed like it pained her to meet their eyes.

Philza's eyes bored into the back of his head the entire way out the door. Once they were out of the throne room and the doors slid shut behind them, Puffy turned down the hallway without a word, no doubt leading them back to their room.

Usually, Puffy didn't speak to them when she was taking them from place to place. She wasn't like Jack with his casual snark and lack of formality. Instead, she was the picture perfect guard, seeing everything yet saying nothing.

Right now, Wilbur was grateful for the silence. He desperately needed time to process everything that had just happened. The numbness from earlier was gone, with dread pouring into every crack and crevice of his crumbling foundation.

Of course, Wilbur couldn't get what he wanted for very long. Because as they turned the corner back into the main hallway, they ran into someone Wilbur absolutely did not want to see right now.

Gold-thread birds glittered in the light pouring from the palace windows. Quackity was leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest with one hand held up to an earpiece settled in his ear.

"Hold on, I'm gonna have to call you back," Quackity said into the earpiece as soon as his eyes landed on Wilbur and Tommy. He tapped the device before pushing off the wall, looking them both up and down as a mocking smile slipped on his face. "Damn, you two look like you just came back from a funeral."

Wilbur grit his teeth. In a way, they were coming back from a funeral. A funeral for themselves. For their chances of actually avoiding what was quickly turning into an inevitable fate.

"Shut up," Wilbur hissed, stopping dead in his tracks.

Tommy and Puffy both froze midstep. Quackity's smile grew.

"Bad news then I'm guessing?"

Letting out a slow breath through his nose, Wilbur glared at Quackity instead of answering.

"Hey man, I'm just trying to make conversation," Quackity said after a beat, holding his hands up in mock surrender.

"I told you to leave us alone," Wilbur spat, curling his hands into fists. "So go kindly fuck off."

"Y'know, you're awfully hostile for someone who's supposed to be good at negotiations," Quackity pointed out, furrowing his brows. "Maybe that's why your negotiations are going so

badly here. If you want people to work with you, it tends to help if they like you.”

Oh, that piece of shit.

Wilbur wasn't exactly sure what happened next. One moment he was staring at Quackity, and the next he was surging towards him, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and pinning him against the wall.

Quackity's back slammed into the stone. Wilbur's blood was roaring in his ears. The anger thrumming through his veins was boiling hot and such a sharp contrast from the numbness that had swallowed his entire body.

“Wilbur!” Tommy shouted.

At the same time, Puffy yelled, “HEY!” And suddenly, there were hands grabbing his arms, and Wilbur was physically yanked away from Quackity.

Puffy pinned his wrists behind his back, her grip like iron despite how much smaller than him she was. He could feel bruises blooming on his skin and he winced, but before he could try to get away from her, Quackity was storming towards him again.

“Quackity-”

Before Puffy could say anything, pain exploded across his right cheek. Wilbur fell to the side, only being kept upright by Puffy's hold. His head was spinning, but the sharp sting of the punch had chased out the haze that had seemed like a permanent part of his mind.

“Don't you *ever* fucking touch me again!” Quackity snarled, although he was little more than a blob in Wilbur's blurred vision.

Suddenly, there was a flash of blonde rushing towards Quackity.

“Keep your hands off my brother!” Tommy shouted, shoving Quackity away from Wilbur.

The hands around his wrists disappeared as Puffy ran to grab Tommy. Wilbur stumbled as he straightened back up, blinking a few times to get his bearings. His vision came back into focus, and he could see that Puffy was physically holding Tommy back from fighting Quackity.

Suddenly,

“Okay, *ENOUGH!*”

Whipping his head to the source of the new voice, all of the air left Wilbur's lungs when he saw Philza and Technoblade standing at the end of the hall. There was a heavy silence as the entire group froze—Puffy holding onto Tommy, Tommy no longer trying to get to Quackity, and Quackity standing as still as a statue.

Philza's icy eyes swept over the four of them before he and Technoblade walked over. Neither one said anything as Technoblade gestured for Puffy to let Tommy go, and as soon as

he was free of her grip, Technoblade had a hand on Tommy's shoulder and gave him a pointed look. A silent warning not to try that again.

Meanwhile, Philza was looking between Quackity, Tommy, and Wilbur like he was struggling to piece together what he was seeing.

"What the fuck just happened?" He asked, finally glancing back at Puffy.

"There was a physical altercation, Your Majesty," Puffy explained, bowing her head. "Prince Orpheus pushed Quackity and I pulled him off, but then Quackity took the opportunity to punch Prince Orpheus, and Prince Theseus shoved him in retaliation."

Wilbur's blood was still roaring in his ears. The cold air of the palace stung the raw skin on his cheek.

Philza's eyes narrowed. He and Technoblade shared an unreadable glance, before Technoblade was letting go of Tommy, and both of them were walking towards Quackity.

Fear flashed in Quackity's dark eyes, but he didn't move as Technoblade grabbed him by the shoulder, and slammed him against the wall just like Wilbur had done only minutes before. Philza's wings were spread out as far as they could go, and they arched over his head as he met Quackity's eyes.

"Is what Puffy said true? Did you punch Prince Orpheus?" Philza asked, a warning clear in his tone.

Quackity clenched his jaw. "He attacked me first."

"But Puffy had already pulled him off of you," Technoblade pointed out. "He wasn't a threat anymore, and yet you hit him anyway."

This time, Quackity faltered for a response. He opened his mouth to argue, but seemed to think better of it and closed it after a moment.

Then, Philza was reaching out. He grabbed Quackity by the chin, forcing him to look up to meet his eyes with his talons pressing so hard, they were nearly breaking the skin.

"We might have an agreement, Quackity, but all agreements can be broken," Philza hissed, his words lined with a razor's edge. "You are a guest of the Antarctic Empire. While you are here, you're at mine and Techno's mercy, do you understand that?"

Despite Quackity trying to keep up a poker face, the fear in his eyes was as plain as day. "I understand."

"Good. Then remember this," Philza said, tightening his grip on Quackity's chin, "Prince Orpheus is under the protection of the Empire. He is *mine*. The same goes for Prince Theseus as well. If you lay a finger on either of them again, it will be treated with the same weight as if you harmed me or Techno."

“That’s the nice way of saying if you hurt one of them again, I’m gonna give you another scar to match the first one,” Technoblade told him, resting one hand on the sword sheathed at his hip.

Quackity sucked in a sharp breath, but he nodded, knowing there was no other choice for him than to agree. “Alright, fine. It won’t happen again.”

A beat passed as Philza stared at Quackity, as if he wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not.

Then, he dropped his hand from Quackity’s chin and stepped back. Technoblade let go of his shoulder, and Quackity winced as he straightened up. After brushing himself off, he sent one last look at Wilbur, anger and frustration mixing together into something altogether sour on his face. But he didn’t say anything. Instead, he just stalked off down the hallway, his footsteps slowly fading away.

With Quackity gone, Philza immediately turned to Wilbur. Nausea once again rose in the back of his throat as those icy eyes looked him over. His anger had faded already, and was left with only a sore jaw and bruised ego to show for it.

He’d lost his temper. Once more, he’d made a fool of himself in front of the people he couldn’t afford to slip up in front of at all.

“Orpheus, let me see your face,” Philza ordered. His voice was softer than it had been when he was speaking to Quackity, but there was a tightness underlying it that told Wilbur not to argue with him right now.

Wilbur had to hunch over so he and Philza were eye to eye. The Emperor eyed the side of his face Quackity had punched, which was no doubt going to bruise later, and brought a hand up to trace the marks with his talons.

“Have you ever been punched before?” Philza asked, his talons feather light against Wilbur’s skin.

“Not for real,” Wilbur admitted.

“Seems like you took the punch pretty well then, at least for a first time,” Philza muttered, slowly moving his hand away. “Why did you shove him?”

Embarrassment flooded through him, making his cheeks burn red as he fought the urge to hide his face. “He was rude.”

Philza hummed at this. “And you lost your temper?”

Wincing, Wilbur nodded. “Yes, I lost my temper.”

“I expect you to be able to control yourself, even in the face of adversity,” Philza said, his words clipped. “You should know better than to physically attack someone for being rude to you.”

There was a loud snort from behind him, making Philza and Wilbur both glance over to where Technoblade still had a hand on Tommy's shoulder.

"Have something to add, Techno?" Philza asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I just think it's a little ironic to hear the guy who once stabbed a fork through someone's hand because he insulted me-"

"Okay, that was a totally different situation and you know it," Philza said, cutting Technoblade off. "That guy had it fucking coming anyway."

...huh?

"And Quackity has a knack for getting himself into trouble a lot. You could argue he had it coming too," Technoblade told him.

Philza sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That's not the point."

"Uh, I just wanna say, he *was* being a prick," Tommy suddenly chimed in, and Wilbur almost smiled at how quick Tommy was to defend him.

Technoblade squeezed Tommy's shoulder. "Hate to say it, but you're a little biased, kid."

"Look, it's irrelevant whether or not he had it coming," Philza said, trying to steer the conversation back on topic. "Orpheus, I've said this before: you're young, but you're not stupid. You know better than this so stop acting like you don't."

Although his words were sharp, it was different from the patronizing tone he used before to scold Wilbur. This one was... not gentler, but less harsh. Not as judgemental. Despite the fact that Wilbur should've been freaking out about the fact that he had lost his shit so badly in front of his enemy, he just couldn't bring himself to care that much. They had dropped the pretenses. Philza knew he was a wreck, so what was the point in keeping up appearances anymore?

He thought back to what Philza had said to Quackity. How he'd described Wilbur and Tommy as *his*. Only minutes earlier, Hannah had said the same thing. *Consider the princes yours*.

Although it was much more subdued than before, the coals in his chest sparked once again.

"I get it. It won't happen again," Wilbur said, his tone clipped.

Philza nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Good. Then I trust that-"

"We're not yours though."

There was a heavy pause as Philza stared at him, the words that had slipped out of Wilbur's mouth without thinking hanging in the air between them like a cloud. He hadn't meant to say that part out loud. All it would do was serve to piss Philza off more. There was no point in arguing about it when there was nothing Wilbur could do to change it.

Still, he said it. And now he had to deal with the fallout.

Philza cocked his head to the side in that birdlike manner once again, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “Mate, is this really what you wanna be hung up on? You’re under our protection. It’s as simple as that.”

“But that’s not what you said,” Wilbur argued, knowing he was going to be kicking himself later for pushing this point. “You told Quackity we were yours. But we’re not. We belong to Eldingvegr.”

The words rang hollow, but he said them anyway. He had to hold onto that. To the belief that he and Tommy were still part of Eldingvegr and would go back to it someday. That they were still two brothers from the planet of eternal twilight, and nothing would take that away from them.

“Now is not the time to be a petty child, Orpheus,” Philza said, taking a slow step towards him. “The fact of the matter is that Eldingvegr isn’t Eldingvegr right now. It’s part of Essempi, which wants you dead. Themis doesn’t want you either. Your life is in my hands, and if I wanted to cut it short, no one would be able to stop me.”

At one point the threat would’ve terrified Wilbur. It would’ve made his heart skip a beat in his chest, and he would’ve had to hide his trembling from Philza so he couldn’t see how terrified he was of the man.

But that time had passed. Wilbur didn’t just know the game now, but he knew Philza himself. He knew what he wanted, and he knew what was truly being played here.

“But you’re not going to,” Wilbur shot back, sounding far calmer than he felt.

At this, Philza’s smile turned into a real one. “You’re right. I’m not going to, and that’s because I protect what’s mine. My planet, my people, my Emperor—and you and your brother as well.”

The brief wave of satisfaction Wilbur got from fighting back was quickly washed away by Philza’s words. He could only watch as Philza stepped back, nodding at Technoblade to follow him. Technoblade squeezed Tommy’s shoulder one last time, giving him a look that Wilbur would almost describe as warm, if Wilbur didn’t think it was impossible for Technoblade to make a face like that.

The two went back to the throne room, their footsteps gradually fading out just like Quackity’s had. Now, it was only him, Tommy, and Puffy again.

Puffy didn’t say anything as she led them back to their room. Wilbur’s face was starting to throb where he’d been hit, but he forced down his wincing and followed in silence. Tommy was also quiet, but he wasn’t as cold to Wilbur as he’d been earlier. Their hands kept brushing, and every once in a while Tommy would push their shoulders together. Although the touches were brief, they were there, and it was a small source of comfort he hadn’t been expecting.



Wilbur felt... hollow. That was the only way he could think to describe it. It was like a huge wave had come and doused him in brine and ice, and now he was left in the cold to dry out on his own. He was defeated, he was frustrated, he was embarrassed—but once again, one feeling trumped all of the others.

He was tired.

They reached the door to their room, and Puffy paused before letting them in. Her grey-green eyes landed on his face again, and she grimaced, leading him to believe that he was already starting to bruise.

“Does it hurt?” She asked, her voice soft.

Wilbur blinked, having never heard the Captain speak so gently before.

“It’s alright,” he said, despite the fact that the throbbing was only getting worse by the second.

Puffy didn’t seem to believe him.

“I’ll have a servant bring you an ice pack,” she told him. Then, before he could argue, she was turning on her heel and heading back down the hall, her curls bouncing with every step.

With that, Tommy led the way into their room. As soon as the doors shut behind them, Wilbur braced himself, waiting for Tommy to yell at him. He knew it was coming. He knew he deserved to be told off for being such an impulsive idiot. It was one thing to snap during a meeting, it was something else entirely to physically *attack* a person.

To his surprise though, the yelling never came.

As soon as they walked into the room, Tommy turned towards the bathroom. He disappeared behind the door for a few seconds, and Wilbur heard water running on the other side. Then, he stepped out again, holding a soft cloth that had been dampened with water.

“Wil, get your ass over here,” Tommy said, although his tone lacked its usual bite as he gestured for Wilbur to sit on the edge of the bed with him.

Blinking a few times, Wilbur trudged over, sitting down next to Tommy as pain radiated through his entire skull.

There was a hand on his face, turning his head to face his little brother. Tommy brought the cloth up to his throbbing cheek, and Wilbur’s eyes fluttered shut when he realized that Tommy had soaked the cloth in freezing cold water.

The coolness was a balm to Wilbur’s overheating face. Tommy held the cloth there for a few moments, before grabbing Wilbur’s hand and putting it on his cheek so he could hold it there himself.

Once Tommy had moved both his hands away, Wilbur opened his eyes again.

“This feels nice,” Wilbur said, sounding strangely hoarse.

“Good,” Tommy huffed, curling his hands into fists in his lap. “I’m still fucking pissed at you.”

“For getting into a fight with Quackity, or just for everything?”

“Everything,” Tommy said. “You’re a fucking asshole.”

Wilbur nodded. “I know.”

This made Tommy scoff. “Yeah, I know you know. You know and you don’t give a shit. I call you an asshole and you think it’s fine and- and it’s fucking stupid. You’re not supposed to be fine with that.” He uncurled his fists, and twisted his fingers into the bottom hem of his shirt. “You tried to attack someone today. You don’t *do* violence, Wil.”

He was right. Wilbur had never been the type to resort to fists over words. In fact, he always took active measures to avoid physical fights whenever possible. Today had unsurfaced some ugly part of him he hadn’t even known existed, and it wasn’t something he was happy about.

Still though, he was tired in a way words couldn’t describe. Far too tired to talk about something that heavy right now.

“Do we really want to get into this again?” He asked instead, eyes falling to his lap.

Tommy was silent for a moment, fingertips turning purple when he twisted the fabric of his shirt around his knuckles. The cloth on Wilbur’s cheek was already growing uncomfortably warm, so he pulled it away and shook it around the air, hoping to cool it off so he could use it again until the ice pack arrived.

When he put the cloth back on his face it was slightly cooler than before, but not by much. It was temporary relief, nothing more.

“I don’t know why, but talking to Princess Myrina today made me realize that we forgot about Vindrūl,” Tommy then said, almost whispering with how soft his words were.

Oh.

*Oh.*

“You’re right,” Wilbur murmured, the cloth falling into his lap. “It would’ve happened... weeks ago, I think.”

Tommy nodded, biting the inside of his cheek. “Do you think they celebrated this year?”

Wilbur tried to imagine it. The people of Dagsbrunstær—capital city of Eldingvegr—hanging up the decorations for a festival with the burnt remains of sylfrwood trees surrounding them on all sides. Would Essempi soldiers be watching them? Would they demand to search every box of garland or tapestry to make sure no one had their own weapons they could use against the soldiers? Would they even let their people have a Vindrūl celebration?

Maybe the Essempi soldiers wouldn't care. Maybe they would watch with disinterest as the baker laid out rows and rows of steaming hot dagrbrað loaves. Maybe they would tap their feet along to the music and laugh when children ran by their feet, squealing with joy at the fact that they could be outside again.

Or maybe there wouldn't be any celebration at all, even if Dream allowed it. Because there wouldn't be anything to celebrate with Prince Theseus gone. When the king passed, there was no Vindrúl celebration that year. If Dream told the people of Eldingvegr that Tommy was dead—which he had no doubt he'd done—then they would be mourning the loss of their future king deeply. It would not be a time for celebration.

"No, I don't think they did," Wilbur answered, running his fingers over the damp cloth. "They're probably mourning you."

Tommy frowned. "They'd be mourning you too."

Wilbur sighed, shaking his head. "Tommy, we both know they're not mourning me."

And Tommy knew he couldn't argue with that.

There was a moment of silence. It settled across Wilbur's shoulders, heavy and stifling in a way silences used to never be with Tommy. But at least it wasn't tense. That was the little bit of relief he needed to breathe.

A warm weight on his shoulder startled Wilbur out of his thoughts. He glanced down and saw Tommy leaning against his side. While he wasn't fully resting his weight on him, his head was on his shoulder, and it was the closest they'd gotten to a hug in weeks.

Wilbur shifted, leaning back towards Tommy so the two were propped up against each other. Neither one said anything, but they didn't need to.

For just a moment, a truce was called on the silent battle they'd been waging for days. For just a moment, they could lean against each other, thinking about the time they'd already lost on Zephys IV, and how different things could be by the time they got back.

If they ever got back.

*If.*

## Chapter End Notes

fun fact I originally didn't plan to have Quackity punch Wilbur but after Wilbur shoved him I was just like.... y'know what would be good? and now here we are. I'm very happy with how that scene turned out as a whole, so I hope you guys enjoyed it too. Also hope you guys enjoyed learning more about Themis! they're kind of assholes!

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I don't reply to most but I read them all and they really make my day <3 also, if you wanna see me talking more about stars, make sure to check out my tumblr. I answer a lot of asks with behind the scenes worldbuilding or just responding to analysis people write about this story and it's a really fun time!

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist I have for this fic [here](#)!

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees :D

# the ghost of the past

## Chapter Summary

The day after his fight with Quackity, Wilbur has several important talks.

## Chapter Notes

hello lovelies i'm here once again with another banger chapter

had a LOT of fun writing this one. like, seriously i love this chapter so much, don't have much to say about it here but i really hope you guys enjoy it :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You seem down.”

The comment was casual, thrown at Wilbur in a way that was probably meant to be some kind of attempt at comfort. Or maybe it was Philza trying to appear empathetic—trying to remind Wilbur that he actually *cared*. At least, that’s what he wanted Wilbur to think.

Too bad Wilbur knew it was bullshit.

“Really? You’re just now noticing?” Wilbur snapped back, words dripping with sarcasm.

Across the room where he was standing in front of the windows, Philza rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be a smartass, Orpheus.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me?” Wilbur challenged coolly.

There was a beat as Philza met his eyes, looking more exasperated than actually upset with Wilbur for his disrespect. It’s not like Wilbur was worried though. Philza had all but confirmed that he wasn’t going to kill him and Tommy no matter what when he had confronted Quackity the day before about punching him. If Philza wanted to taunt him, Wilbur didn’t care. He was going to snap right back at him now that he knew he wasn’t gambling with his and Tommy’s lives.

It was a quiet day in the palace. Wilbur had woken up with a throbbing headache, and Tommy had called the servants for another ice pack and held it to his swollen eye while he ate breakfast. Once they'd both eaten, Tommy had told Wilbur he was going to train with Technoblade again, and Wilbur had nodded without comment.

Things were still distant between him and Tommy, but the incident with Quackity paired with their discussion about Vindrūl seemed to melt some of the ice that had frosted over all of their interactions. It wasn't perfect, but at least it was a bit easier to breathe around his little brother than it had been before.

After Tommy had left, it wasn't long before Jack was knocking on his door with another summons for Wilbur. There was no surprise at this point. He and Philza were having these private talks on a near daily basis now, with Wilbur having no choice but to resign himself to them. If Philza wanted to talk, they would talk.

That didn't mean Wilbur had to be polite to him though.

Another few seconds ticked by in silence. Then, Philza let out a soft sigh, and walked across the room towards the steps of the throne platform Wilbur was currently sitting on. Wilbur tensed as Philza sat down next to him, trying not to flinch as a large black wing stretched out behind his shoulders.

Without saying a word, Philza reached for Wilbur's face, gently grabbing his chin between his talons so he could examine the black eye Wilbur was now sporting. Even though Wilbur knew all it would take was a single swipe for Philza to slice open his face with those talons, he found that he wasn't afraid as a single claw brushed the bruised skin under his eye.

Wilbur wasn't afraid, but he wasn't comfortable either. If anything, it was difficult to describe exactly what he was feeling right then. He'd woken up in a numb haze broken only by a heavy kind of melancholy that had wrapped itself around his shoulders. It was duller sadness than what he'd been feeling before. Like his grief was being smoothed down over time by rushing water, wearing his sharp edges away until he was left as just a shell of himself.

He was angry, but he was tired. He was sad, but he was numb.

The claws were gentle against his bruised skin. In a way, it was almost comforting.

"Are you in pain?" Philza asked, blackened fingertips surprisingly warm compared to the icy chill surrounding them.

"No, I took painkillers this morning," Wilbur told him, noticing how even his voice sounded strangely hollow.

Humming, Philza let go of his face, and a very small part of Wilbur mourned the loss of warmth.

"If you need any more don't hesitate to ask for it," Philza said, folding his hands together. "You should've never been harmed in the first place. Not here under my supervision."

Because Philza considered him and Tommy to belong to him. Because Philza didn't like when those under his protection were harmed.

Wilbur still didn't understand why this was. Sure, as political tools Wilbur could understand why Philza would want to keep them safe. They were still in the middle of negotiations after

all, even if they hadn't made any progress on that front in ages. But to care about something as little as someone punching him? Wilbur didn't get it.

The only reasonable explanation was that Philza was trying to gain their trust by pretending to care about them. But he'd always insisted that he was honest with his intentions, and despite everything that had happened so far, he hadn't done anything to disprove that. Philza was upfront. It wouldn't make sense for him to suddenly pull an underhanded move like this when their dynamic had finally shifted to something... well, not friendly, but not hostile either.

It didn't make sense. It didn't make sense, but Wilbur was also growing tired of trying to figure out every mind game Philza was playing with him. Especially today, when his chest still ached from the revelation about Themis and Niki, and he could still feel the ghost of Quackity's fist hitting his cheek.

When Wilbur didn't reply to this, instead choosing to just stare straight at the wall, he could sense a shift in the air between them.

"You're not acting like yourself, Orpheus," Philza said, his voice much softer than before.

Wilbur snorted, and it was a bitter sound. "I haven't been acting like myself for a very long time."

From the corner of his eye, he could just make out Philza frowning. "Since you left Eldingvegr?"

Eldingvegr. The last place he'd felt like he knew the path his life was taking. Empty days watched over by twilight skies and uncaring servants. A lifetime of marching towards a future he never got to have a say in.

Had he been himself back on Eldingvegr? When he was trying to conform to what everyone wanted from him?

A future advisor?

A humble prince?

The apologetic bastard child?

That version of himself felt so far away now. The prince that would crumble under criticism and speak only in the formal etiquette that was expected of him. A boy who would probably have a heart attack if he heard the way Wilbur now spoke to the Emperor of the Antarctic Empire when it was just the two of them.

At the same time though, it wasn't like Wilbur knew who he was on Zephyr IV either. These days, he didn't even recognize himself in the mirror. His voice was foreign to his own ears sometimes, rambling about his delusions or snapping at the only person who still gave a shit about him. He was falling apart in every way possible, but he didn't recognize any of the broken pieces of his own foundations.

“Since I was born, probably,” Wilbur admitted, resting his chin on top of his knees.

Was that answer then? That Wilbur had no idea who he was because he’d always been trying to be someone else?

Maybe there was a partial truth to that. But it wasn’t completely correct. Wilbur knew who he was when Tommy curled into his side, or when Niki wrapped his hand in her own. If he could make Tommy laugh or Niki smile—that felt right. His brother and his best friend. There was no act he was putting on with either of them.

“I wasn’t always this pathetic,” Wilbur told Philza, the words slipping out without him thinking about them. “Or this much of a mess in general. Back on Eldingvegr things weren’t perfect, but Tommy and Niki both kept me stable.”

He didn’t know why he was telling Philza this. It wasn’t like it was going to change anything, and he knew that.

But Wilbur just... wanted to talk. Philza only knew one version of Wilbur—arguably the worst version of himself he’d ever been. For some reason, he wanted Philza to know that he used to be more than this. That while he might’ve always been a pillar battered by tumultuous seas, he used to be in far better condition than he was now.

“Niki?” Philza questioned, furrowing his eyebrows.

“Lady Nihachu,” Wilbur clarified, swallowing down the lump in his throat. “Her full name and title is Lady Niki Nihachu, Emissary to the Order of Anthemoessa.”

“The Themisian who helped you and Theseus escape,” Philza said. Wilbur nodded, even though it wasn’t a question. “Were you close with her?”

Close. Wilbur didn’t think that word accurately conveyed what Niki was to him. While Tommy was half of his heart, Niki was half of his mind. They could read each other like books they had memorized. They could finish each other’s sentences, and could tell what the other was thinking without even saying it out loud.

If something happened to Tommy, it would feel like Wilbur was stabbed in the chest and left to slowly bleed out on the floor. But without Niki around, it was like a bone had been snapped in half, and it refused to heal right. He could live, but he was always going to have a limp without her.

“She’s my best friend,” Wilbur whispered, blinking fast to force down the burning in his eyes.

The wing stretched behind him curled closer, and Wilbur didn’t fight it when it wrapped around his shoulder. There was a strange comfort to having Philza’s wing looming over him like this. He would expect to feel trapped, but instead he just felt... shielded.

“But she stayed on Eldingvegr, while you and Theseus fled?” Philza asked.



Wilbur winced. “We had to leave her behind,” he confessed, the sins tasting like ash on his tongue. “We tried to break her out but- but the guards were coming and Tommy couldn’t get the barrier to come down. Dream was going to kill us, but I knew he wouldn’t hurt a Themisian. So I just-” his breathing hitched. “I panicked and ran.”

Philza made a noise of understanding. “And now you don’t know where she is.”

“No, I don’t,” Wilbur shook his head. “I betrayed her and left her there. I thought she would be safe, but now she’s gone and she probably thinks Tommy and I are dead.” He let out a humorless laugh. “It might be better that way, in all honesty. She’s probably furious with me.”

Humming, Philza curled his wing closer to Wilbur’s shoulder.

“She might be, but if you’re as close as you said, she would more likely be relieved to find out you’re alive,” Philza pointed out. “I’m a bit surprised that you two are so close though, considering she’s from Themis and the Themisians as a whole don’t seem to be very fond of you.”

“Well, you can blame the Themisians for that one,” Wilbur huffed. “Niki hasn’t been on Themis since she was eight years old. They named her the emissary and sent her to Eldingvegr, just expecting her to stay loyal to her home planet without giving her any real reason to be.”

“Why would they give an eight year old a diplomatic mission?” Philza asked, frowning now.

“Her job was to basically supervise me and Tommy at all times, and report back to the Themisian Ambassadors if there was anyone attempting to manipulate Tommy into ruining the alliance or some shit like that.”

“That’s... strange,” Philza muttered, glancing at the ground.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Wilbur said, the burning in his eyes fading now. “But, uh, yeah. I’m only a few months older than her, so we pretty much grew up together. And I just-” another hitched breath. “I don’t even know why the fuck I’m telling you all of this.”

“I asked you about her.”

“Yeah but-” but in the past, he would’ve lied or changed the subject. He wouldn’t have spilled his entire history with Niki to *Philza*. Not without some reason for it.

But then again, it wasn’t like there was a reason he couldn’t talk about Niki either.

“I guess it doesn’t fucking matter,” Wilbur mumbled, dragging his hands down his face. “It’s not like I’m ever going to see her again. She doesn’t know where we are, we don’t know where she is- if the Themisians can’t find her, that means she’s either dead, or she’s found a hiding place that no one will ever be able to find her at.”

And with saying the words out loud, Wilbur was hit all at once with the weight of that truth. That he was probably never going to see his best friend again. That regardless of whether or

not Niki was still alive, she was dead to him because he was never going to see her or hear her voice ever again.

The ache in his chest was consuming him. He missed her so much. He missed their late night talks. He missed running through the palace halls with her and Tommy when they were little. He missed celebrating Vindrūl with her, Tommy, and Tubbo, and how the four of them would try to see who could snag the most sweets before the end of the day, so they could pile them all together and host their own feast in Tommy's room.

Fuck. *Fuck*. He missed Eldingvegr. Soft pink skies and glimmering sylfrwood trees, the smell of baking dagrbrað wafting through the air, the way the orrery would shimmer like it was a living creature in itself despite being made of gold and silver—he missed all of it. Even his glasses, because while the ones Zephys IV gave him worked perfectly fine the metal was heavier than the metal they used for the frames on Eldingvegr. It was heavier and it was wrong.

Lifting his head up, Wilbur forced himself to take the deepest breath he could. He would not cry. Not now. Not in front of Philza. If he let himself break once, that was going to be the tipping point. One teardrop was all it would take for his entire being to break apart into a million pieces.

“Are you alright?” Philza asked, no doubt having noticed the shift in his mood.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Wilbur forced out, although his voice was close to cracking.

Philza raised an eyebrow at him, clearly not believing a word he said.

Shit. He needed to say something. Give Philza a less embarrassing reason for why he was so emotional today. Because he couldn't just say it was everything. That was too much. He didn't want Philza to pity him. (Although, sharing his entire story about Niki probably didn't do himself any favors in that regard).

What was an easy answer he could give?

“Sorry if I’m a bit out of sorts. Last night Tommy just reminded me that we, uh, missed our favorite holiday back on Eldingvegr so it just... brought up memories,” he tried, dropping his eyes back to his lap.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about Eldingvegrian culture or traditions, but that’s not to say I’m not curious about them,” Philza said, speaking with such a careful tone, it was like he was afraid Wilbur was going to shatter at the slightest push. “Could you tell me about it?”

Wilbur should say no. This conversation was already so drastically different from all the other ones he and Philza had had before, and that made it dangerous. He was in far too honest of a mood to be talking to the Emperor so much. He needed to go to his room and try to recharge. Build up his walls again, and try to gain the mental energy back so they could resume the mind games they'd been playing this entire time. That was familiar territory with Philza. Not... Not whatever this was.

But it had been *so long* since Wilbur had just talked to someone. Not arguing with Tommy, not analyzing Ranboo's behaviors, not wondering what Philza and Technoblade were thinking—he'd gotten close with Schlatt, but they hadn't spoken of things like home and friends. They simply joked around while matching each other shot for shot. It was genuine, but only surface-level. This was something else. And it was something Wilbur hadn't even realized he was missing until now.

Maybe he could have a normal conversation with Philza. One where there were no games and no guessing at ulterior motives. A conversation where Wilbur wasn't Prince Orpheus and Philza wasn't Emperor Philza. Maybe he could let himself indulge, just once.

"Vindrūl is a festival we hold to celebrate the end of the windy season," Wilbur began, twisting his fingers into the edge of his coat. "The streets of Dagsbrunstær are decorated with these floating orbs of light that are like the ones that light up your streets here, but much smaller, probably only the size of your fingertip. Garlands are strung up between buildings, and people set up stands selling things like sweets and drinks. There's live music and dancing and people just celebrating the fact that they lived through another windy season." He paused, mouth twisting into a frown. "Obviously deaths are very rare nowadays during the windy season. But Vindrūl's been happening for centuries, so it wasn't always like that."

They only had five casualties to the windy season in the past twenty years: his mother, Tommy's father, and the crew of their ship.

"There's this, um, dessert that we have during it," Wilbur continued, not letting himself dwell on those memories. "It's called dagrbrað. I guess the easiest way to describe it would be bread, but it's really sweet bread. The dough is very light and fluffy, and the outside is absolutely covered in sugar. You're only supposed to make it for Vindrūl, so when me, Niki, and Tommy were little, our favorite part of the festival was getting to eat it."

Just talking about Vindrūl made the ache worse, but there was also a certain measure of relief that came with it as well. A lifted weight, a loosened knot—it helped, in some way or another.

Philza was silent again for a few long beats. When Wilbur finally glanced over at him, he saw that the man was watching him with something warm flashing through his icy gaze. Or maybe something like surprise.

"You really care about Eldingvegr, don't you?"

Wilbur blinked. "Of course I do. It's where I grew up."

Humming, Philza nodded, considering Wilbur for a moment. "Sorry if I seem surprised. It's just interesting to see someone so passionate about their planet's culture, especially when you're not technically a native to the planet yourself."

"I grew up there," Wilbur repeated, gritting his teeth. "Just because my parents—"

"No no, I don't mean it like that," Philza reassured him, tucking the wing closer around Wilbur like he was trying to soothe him. "I didn't mean to imply that it wasn't your culture."

Like you said, you grew up there. I just noticed it because I wasn't like that when I was your age."

Now this made Wilbur pause.

"What do you mean?" He asked, frowning at Philza.

Philza shrugged, his feathers ruffling with the gesture. "I mean that I didn't grow up on the planet my parents came from either, but I've never felt that kind of connection with... well, any specific culture really." He glanced back at Wilbur, tilting his head at him once again. "How much do you know about the planet Elytra?"

"Uh," Wilbur blinked, struggling to remember his lessons, "not much, if I'm being honest. All I really know is that pure-blooded elytrians like you are nearly extinct because the planet was wiped out over a century ago."

"Actually, it's closer to three centuries," Philza corrected him. "Elytra was destroyed a few decades before I was born. There wasn't much to it except for the fact that it was simply bad luck. An asteroid was knocked out of its orbit by another asteroid, and didn't get spotted until it was only a few days out from hitting the planet. They tried to evacuate, but you can't evacuate an entire planet in a few days. It just doesn't work." His feathers puffed up then, like he was trying to block out the chill of the palace air for Wilbur. "Bad fucking luck for most of the planet, and good luck only for the few thousand elytrians who managed to escape before the carnage. Then, because of how fast it all happened, everything was disorganized as could be, and the few remaining elytrians scattered across the galaxy. That's mostly why you see so many avians, but almost no pure-blooded elytrians. They were all separated."

"But you're a full elytrian," Wilbur pointed out.

"Yes, I am," Philza nodded. "My parents were both still pretty young when it happened, and their families were part of a small group that all left together. They ended up on some small, Outer Sector planet, and as the news came back that almost all of Elytra had perished, these families got the idea that they would need to be the ones to make sure the elytrian species didn't die out." He huffed out a bitter laugh. "So that's where I came from. A last ditch attempt from two people who didn't love each other to try and save an already lost species."

Oh.

That was... strangely sad.

"I suppose I got the closest thing to an elytrian childhood as any elytrian that was born after The Destruction could get," Philza said, leaning back against his arms on the steps. "My parents tried their best with me, but it wasn't because they wanted kids or anything. I was part of their 'moral duty' to 'keep the spirit of Elytra alive'. But they were only able to grab a few things when they were fleeing Elytra—some books, old photos, and a few pieces of jewelry. But outside of those things, the most exposure to Elytrian culture I got was through stories they'd tell me of how great the planet used to be. How beautiful and wondrous Elytra was, and how tragic it was that I'd never be able to see it."

Something in Philza's face softened then, and although his eyes were just as pale as they always were, for the first time Wilbur didn't think they reminded him of chips of ice. Slush and snow maybe, but not pure ice.

"Growing up, I never really knew who I was supposed to be. The culture my family kept trying to teach me was long gone, and we moved between planets too often for me to really find a home on any of them either." A pause. "I was lost, both in the galaxy and in myself. I tried to be what others wanted, but no matter what I did, I just didn't belong anywhere."

That- no, that was wrong. Philza didn't just say all those things, because that was exactly the way Wilbur felt.

*Lost.*

*Trying to be what others wanted.*

*Not belonging anywhere.*

Wilbur's ears were ringing as Philza reached out a hand again, the razor sharp talon brushing under his black eye so gently, the touch was lighter than a feather.

"It's why you remind me so much of myself, little bird," Philza told him, his voice soft. "All you want is to belong somewhere. You don't know who you are because you've always been trying to be what others want, but it's never been enough. You're lost, just like I was."

No. Wilbur was nothing like Philza. Even though Philza kept saying he was, it was just a tactic he was using to manipulate him. That's all.

But-

But how did he *know*? How could he put into words that aimless feeling that had plagued Wilbur his entire life? Those were things Wilbur had never told anyone. Not even Niki. But Philza... he understood.

His eyes were burning again. His thoughts were hazy, the warmth from Philza's hand and his wing bleeding through Wilbur's coat. He needed the chill back. The warmth was distracting him, and it was just making that unbearable ache even worse than it already was.

"I- I need to go," Wilbur stammered, pushing Philza's hand away from him and stumbling to his feet. Before Philza could open his mouth to say anything, Wilbur was storming out of the throne room, despite the fact that he hadn't formally been dismissed.

Icy air blasted him on his way through the doors. But despite the cold, his thoughts were still racing and spinning every which way, and he ignored Jack's shout of protest as he hurried down the hall without waiting for his guard to catch up.

Philza's words echoed through his mind with every step he took. *You're lost, just like I was.* Wilbur was lost. He was lost and Philza understood him. In a way, despite how drastically different their upbringings were, they were mirrors of each other. No true home, no culture that wanted to claim them, just broken pieces of debris left to drift among the cosmos.

Wilbur shook his head. That wasn't right. He wasn't like Philza. Even if Eldingvegr hadn't wanted him, he was Eldingvegrian. That was his home.

...right?

So lost in his own head, Wilbur didn't even realize where his feet were carrying him until he found himself standing outside of the doors that led into Philza and Technoblade's personal wing. The same doors he had to go through if he ever wanted to go to the training room.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur was hit with a sudden urge to see Tommy. Despite their arguing, Tommy knew him better than anyone else in the palace. Tommy could remind him where his home truly was. Tommy could remind him that he wasn't like Philza.

"I believe Prince Theseus is training with the Emperor right now," Wilbur told the guards standing on either side of the locked doors. "I would like to go see him."

One of the guards frowned, but before she could say anything, there was the sound of labored breathing as Jack caught up to him.

"Shit man, you training for a goddamn marathon or something?" Jack asked, forehead glistening with sweat.

"I want to see my brother," Wilbur told him, fixing his gaze on the doors. "Tell them to let me in."

Jack sighed, nodding at the guards. "Let him in."

After sharing an uncertain look, the guards relented, and the doors slid open with a soft hiss. Giving Jack a nod of thanks, Wilbur hurried into the wing of the palace that was most unfamiliar to him, with Jack stumbling over his feet to try and keep up with Wilbur's longer legs.

Even though it had been a while since he'd been to the training room, Wilbur remembered the way without needing to think twice about which turns to take. Within a few minutes, he could hear the sounds of Tommy's laughter echoing down the halls, and a lump formed in his throat when he realized he hadn't heard Tommy laugh like that in... quite a while.

His steps slowed. The training room's doors had been left open, and he stopped walking right before he reached the open doorway. From there, he could hear Tommy's laughs reverberating with the metallic sound of knives clashing.

"You're such a bitch, *Techno-blade*. Can't even disarm me if you wanted!" Tommy teased, and Wilbur's eyes widened hearing Tommy call the Emperor by his first name.

It made sense. Of course it did. Wilbur had stopped calling Philza by his title long ago, and with all the time Technoblade and Tommy spent together, of course they would've dropped the titles too.

Still, it was a strange thing to hear.

“Trust me, kid, I could disarm you if I wanted,” Technoblade fired back, and there was another metallic *clang!*

“Oh really?” Tommy taunted. “What if I do *this?!?*” Suddenly, there was a loud grunt, and Tommy’s maniacal laughter rang out.

“Wh- You can’t just climb on me, Theseus!” Technoblade exclaimed. “That’s not how this works!”

...what?

Deciding to take a risk, Wilbur peeked his head into the doorway so he could see what was going on inside the training room.

Tommy had somehow climbed onto Technoblade’s back, and had his arms wrapped around the man’s neck like some kind of demented forest creature. Technoblade’s dagger had been dropped on the floor, while Tommy was trying to press his to Technoblade’s neck, although he was struggling to hold on the more Technoblade tried to peel him off.

“You gotta admit defeat!” Tommy declared, a wide smile stretched across his cheeks. “Then you can tell all your wives you were bested by the all-powerful Prince Theseus Thomas Íóni himself!”

At this, Technoblade stopped trying to get Tommy off his back and frowned. “My wives?”

“Yes, your many wives!”

“I wasn’t aware I was married to anyone,” Technoblade deadpanned, ignoring Tommy now as the boy wrapped his legs around his waist to hold onto his back better.

“Are you telling me the Emperor of the Antarctic Empire doesn’t get bitches?”

Technoblade sighed, reaching up to pry the dagger out of Tommy’s hands and tossing it on the floor. “I don’t think you’re gonna be able to climb on your opponent’s back like some kind of rabid cat if you’re in a battle, Theseus.”

“That’s what you think,” Tommy shot back, resting his chin on Technoblade’s shoulder. “Also you gotta stop calling me Theseus when it’s just us. It feels fucking weird.”

A rock dropped into Wilbur’s gut hearing that.

Strangely enough, Technoblade didn’t seem surprised by this. He just let out a soft laugh, and reached up to get Tommy’s arms away from his neck. “If I’m bein’ honest, I kinda like Theseus better. It suits you.”

“But it’s so boring and long,” Tommy groaned, tightening his hold around the man’s neck.

“Fine. Tommy, will you please get off my back now?” Technoblade asked, looking like he was struggling not to smile.

Tommy snickered as he let go of Technoblade, dropping to the mat with a soft thud. “Sure thing, *Techno*.”

No.

Wilbur had to be mishearing things. That couldn’t be right. Tommy couldn’t be telling Technoblade, Imperator of the Antarctic Empire, to call him by his personal name.

There was no tension between them as Technoblade dragged a hand through Tommy’s hair, making his curls stick up in every direction. Tommy didn’t seem the slightest bit worried as he picked his dagger up off the ground, nudging Technoblade with his elbow once he straightened back up. When Technoblade looked at Tommy, there was so much warmth in his golden gaze, it felt like Wilbur was intruding on something personal.

Nausea rose in the back of his throat. He couldn’t be here.

Without saying a word, Wilbur stumbled away from the doorway and turned back the way they came. When Jack opened his mouth to say something, Wilbur made a shushing gesture at him, before hurrying back out of Philza and Technoblade’s personal wing.

That wasn’t how Tommy was supposed to be interacting with someone who wanted to take over their planet. He wasn’t supposed to be laughing and teasing him, asking the Imperator to call him by his personal name and calling him by a nickname in turn.

Tommy didn’t smile or laugh like that with Wilbur anymore. These days, when he saw Wilbur, the only thing on Tommy’s face would be worry or anger. And Wilbur knew it was for good reason, because he wasn’t being *nice* to his little brother anymore. But Technoblade wasn’t supposed to be nice to him either. And yet the two were close. So close in such a short amount of time. How the fuck had Wilbur missed that?

Technoblade had to be manipulating Tommy. Getting close to him to make him want to hand over Eldingvegr. It was twisted and cruel, but it was the only explanation Wilbur could think of. Technoblade had no reason to care about Tommy. He wanted Eldingvegr, and nothing more.

Except...

Philza didn’t have a reason to care about Wilbur either. He didn’t have a reason to tell Wilbur about his childhood, or to threaten Quackity’s life for hurting him, or to rest a hand on his face and gently trace the bruises under his eye.

He called Wilbur ‘little bird’ when it was just the two of them. And although Wilbur knew it had to be some kind of insult, a reminder that he was an inexperienced child compared to Philza, it never felt like that when he said it. If anything, it almost felt... fond.

Fuck. Philza was getting into his head, just like Technoblade was getting into Tommy’s.

The doors to the personal wing slid open as Wilbur stormed back into the main palace. He could hear Jack struggling to keep up with him, but he didn’t bother to slow down. He had to



get away from that training room. He needed to stay away from the throne room. Right now, Wilbur didn't want to think about either of those places, or the people inside of them.

"Where are we going?" Jack called out behind him.

Where was Wilbur going? He didn't know. His room sounded suffocating, but if he went to the library, Philza would probably find him.

The waves in his mind were crashing so loudly, he couldn't even hear himself think. His chest was aching and there were so many different emotions spinning in his mind, he couldn't put a single name to any of them if he tried.

He hated the mental image of Tommy smiling at Technoblade that kept replaying in his head. The ghost of Philza's hand was still resting on his face. If he tried to block all of that out, he found his palms twitching, like he could still feel Niki's webbed fingers squeezing his own.

"Orpheus!" Jack suddenly shouted, and Wilbur was stopped dead in his tracks by the guard grabbing his shoulder.

"What?!" Wilbur snapped, whirling around on Jack.

Jack flinched, startled by Wilbur shouting at him, and guilt joined in on the maelstrom in his head.

Before he could feel too bad about it though, Jack's expression was hardening. "Look mate, I get it, you're fucking stressed. You can yell as much as you want, but that's not gonna change the fact that I got a job to do. Tell me where you want to go, and I can get you there, but I'm not wearing my running shoes today and I don't feel like chasing after a pissy prince."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Wilbur tried to force out a slow breath from his nose. "I just- I-" his breathing hitched. "I don't know where to go."

"Do you wanna go back to your room?" Wilbur shook his head. "And not the library either?" Another shake.

"My head just feels like it's gonna fucking explode," Wilbur admitted, his voice sounding far more broken than he meant it to. "I need- I don't know, I need to just not be *here*."

Jack considered this for a moment before nodding. "Alright, I can do that."

Then, before Wilbur could say anything, Jack was grabbing his wrist and dragging him down the hall.

Wilbur didn't pay attention to where they were going this time. Jack led him down several twists and turns, then up a flight of stairs to a second level Wilbur didn't even realize was there. The entire time they were walking, Jack kept a firm grip on his wrist, like he was trying to keep Wilbur from running away. In a way it was almost laughable, but he also understood why Jack was doing it considering Wilbur pretty much did run away earlier.

They came to a small door that Jack used a scanner to open. The room was the size of a closet, with only a set of spiral stairs leading up inside of him. Jack led him up the steps, twisting around and around and around until they got to the ceiling, where a trapdoor sat embedded in the stone.

Another scan and the trapdoor slid open. Jack climbed out first, and although Wilbur knew he should've been more hesitant, he was too caught up with everything else to second-guess anything as he followed suit.

Ice cold air slapped Wilbur in the face as soon as he was through the trapdoor. It was far colder than anything Wilbur had felt in the palace, and it took him a moment to realize that was because they weren't technically *in* the palace anymore.

They were on a small landing on the roof of one of the spires. A thin metal fence was all that stood between them and empty air, with the capital city of Zephyr IV stretching out in front of them like a glittering sea of lights.

Jack had settled himself on one end of the small landing, and while there wasn't much room up there, Wilbur did his best to sit on the other side. He leaned back against the wall, a frigid breeze making shivers run up his spine as he brought his knees up to his chest.

"It's fucking freezing up here," Wilbur muttered, although the cold was forcing his thoughts to slow down as he shifted his focus to staying warm.

Jack snorted. "Yeah, it is. You've been nice and cozy inside the palace this whole time, but this is what it's like the minute you step outside."

A shudder ran down Wilbur's spine as he wrapped his arms around his knees. "It's nice though," he said, staring out at the dark metal structures spanning across the ice cavern. "How'd you know this place was here?"

"I'm literally a palace guard. I know this place like the back of my hand," Jack huffed. "I actually come out here a lot. Just to get away from all the bullshit for a bit."

"I wouldn't blame you if you've had to come out here after listening to me bitch someone out for the millionth time," Wilbur snorted, resting his head against the metal wall.

Instead of laughing at that like he expected, Jack shook his head. "You're not that bad, man. If anything, you're a thousand times better than any of the other royal pricks I've had to interact with before."

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "I highly doubt that."

"No, I'm being serious. Sure you're a bit high-strung, but you're not, like, taking it out on me or anything. I just get to watch you bitch out other people, which is honestly pretty entertaining," Jack said, grinning now. "You wouldn't believe how boring this job gets sometimes. I was fucking pissed when I found out you and Quackity got into a fight and I wasn't around to see it."

“How about I just shove him again next time we see him, that way you can watch our round two?” Wilbur joked, the waves growing quieter in his head.

“As fun as that would be, I’m pretty sure that would end up in Quackity getting his face sliced open by the Emperor, and I really don’t feel like having to clean blood off the floor,” he shot back. “Either that or the Emperor would straight up execute him, considering what Puffy told me he said to Quackity.”

The smile faded from Wilbur’s face as he thought back to the day before. Another chill ran down his spine, and Jack’s smile disappeared as well.

“I know this is way above my pay-grade, so you don’t have to tell me or anything because I’m just being a nosy prick,” Jack began after a few minutes, keeping his eyes trained on the horizon. “But what the fuck’s going on with you and the Emperor? Today you ran out of the throne room looking like you’d just seen a ghost or something.”

The wording of Jack’s question would’ve made Wilbur laugh if it didn’t also make him want to cry. Because in a way, he *had* seen a ghost while talking to Philza. The ghost of his past, a ghost of Philza’s past, the way those two ghosts looked almost the same.

“It’s... difficult to explain,” Wilbur said softly, his voice almost being carried away by the wind. “Philza just told me some things that I didn’t really want to hear, and I got overwhelmed.” He took a breath to steady himself, and was relieved to find his chest didn’t stutter like it had before. “We’d also been talking about some emotional shit I guess, so I was already a bit more out of it than usual.”

“Talking about emotional shit with Emperor Philza? The ice king himself?” Jack questioned.

“Yeah, I know,” Wilbur snorted. “I was surprised too. Though it’s partially my own fault because I was the one who got nostalgic first.” He pressed his lips together, taking off his glasses and tucking them in his pocket. “Got bad news about an old friend yesterday, so it’s just fucked me up a bit.”

“Aw shit, I’m sorry, man.”

Wilbur shrugged. “It’s whatever. She’s missing, not dead, so at least there’s that. But I’m obviously pretty worried about her.” He paused then, thinking back to how blunt Jack had been a few minutes earlier before dragging him up here. “You remind me a bit of her I think.”

Jack frowned. “I do?”

“Only in a few ways,” Wilbur clarified, wringing his hands together to keep them from going numb. “You both can be pretty blunt if you want to be, especially when it comes to dealing with my bullshit.”

“Ah, the very thing I’ve nearly gotten fired for,” Jack chuckled, shaking his head. “Guess it makes sense why you haven’t complained about me to Puffy yet.”

“You thought I was going to complain about you?” Wilbur asked, furrowing his brows.

“Honestly, yeah? Most royals like you don’t really appreciate the Jack Manifold charm,” he joked, smiling to himself. “Not that I care. I told you on the first day we met that I didn’t care if you complained to Puffy, and I meant it.”

Wilbur laughed. “Well, I can see how your ‘charm’ might be an acquired taste. But I think it’s refreshing. You get tired of the bullshit etiquette after a while.”

“I can imagine you would,” Jack nodded, still staring out at the horizon.

A beat passed.

Then another.

“You know, you’re not as bad as you make yourself out to be,” Jack then said, fiddling with the cuffs of his sleeves. “You say you bitch people out or whatever, and yeah you definitely can be rude when people are rude to you first, but when you’ve met as many politicians as I have you get a good sense for people. You’re not a bad person, Orpheus.”

And despite all of Jack’s brashness and blunt words, there was an overwhelming amount of sincerity dripping from his words. Despite the cold, something warm bubbled up inside of Wilbur at that, and he found a question he hadn’t planned on asking falling from his lips.

“Would... Would you say I’m anything like Philza?” Wilbur asked, wincing at how fragile his voice sounded.

Jack didn’t respond immediately. He considered the question, biting the inside of his cheek as he folded his hands together.

“I’m not the kind of guy who’s just gonna say the shit you wanna hear, so know that I’m being totally honest when I say this,” Jack began, choosing his words carefully. “But yes. Sometimes when I hear you talk to someone like... I dunno, Ranboo or Karl or even Schlatt, I feel like I can imagine what the Emperor was like when he was your age.”

Dread formed a tight ball in his stomach, and Wilbur grit his teeth to hold back a wince.

“That’s not an insult by the way,” Jack added, noticing Wilbur’s face. “For all the shit I say, I admire the Emperor and the Imperator both so goddamn much. I’m really fucking glad I get to live here on Zephyr IV and not somewhere else like one of the planets that’s under Essempi’s rule. Philza and Technoblade are good leaders. They actually care about their people, and aren’t just in this for themselves. If we weren’t happy with Philza as our Emperor, we would be rioting in the streets and setting the palace on fire.”

“Really?”

“Trust me, no one knows how to riot better than the citizens of Zephyr IV,” Jack said, smirking now. “Saying that you remind me of Philza is a compliment, Orpheus.”

*Orpheus.* It was so jarring to hear his formal name in a situation like this. When Wilbur was so raw and exhausted, feeling hollowed out by the icy wind howling across the rooftop.

“Wilbur,” he corrected, his voice low. “Call me Wilbur, Jack.”

It was the first time since he’d arrived on Zephyrs IV that he’d granted someone permission to use his personal name. Up until now, he’d refused to show that kind of submission. He wasn’t a part of Zephyrs IV, so he wasn’t going to let anyone call him Wilbur. Not even Schlatt, despite the tentative truce they’d struck with each other.

But Jack wasn’t part of the game of politics. He was just a guard who saw everything and said nothing. Who understood far more than he let on.

Jack was silent for a moment, staring at Wilbur in blatant shock.

“I thought only friends were supposed to call you by your personal name,” Jack pointed out.

Wilbur thought back to Tommy and Technoblade.

“Yeah, they are,” he nodded. “I’d like to think I can call you a friend at this point.”

“Oh.” Jack blinked a few times, looking like he wasn’t sure what to do with this information. “I... thanks, Wilbur. I appreciate that.”

He hesitated saying his name, but there was something relieving about finally hearing someone other than Tommy or Aimsey call him by it after so long.

Before he could bask in the relief for too long though, Jack spoke up again.

“Wilbur, if we’re friends then I need to tell you something,” he said, not meeting Wilbur’s eyes. “When I first got assigned to you, I was instructed by Puffy to keep her updated on both you and Theseus. What you talked about, how you were acting, what your moods were—creepy spying bullshit that I hated. So I always made my reports as vague as possible because it just felt fucking wrong, y’know? And- And I’m not going to tell her about today, because I don’t want to. I think it’s a total invasion of privacy so as far as she’ll know, I just took you back to your room-”

“Jack,” Wilbur said, cutting Jack’s rambling off. “I assumed you were reporting everything we did back to someone the day we first met.”

There was a beat as Jack blinked at him.

“You... You *knew*?”

“I mean, I didn’t know for sure, but it’s a pretty standard thing when you have other politicians staying on your planet. Guards are considered invisible, so they’re pretty invaluable for getting information on the people you’re trying to negotiate with,” Wilbur explained, thinking back to the many times he’d kept his mouth shut while walking down the hallways with Tommy because he knew Jack was only a few steps behind.

Jack frowned. “So that’s just fucking normal?”

“It is on a lot of planets,” Wilbur shrugged, leaning back against the wall again. “I was raised to be an advisor, Jack. I know exactly how this game is played.”

Shoulders sagging, Jack dropped his eyes to the ground. “Well fuck, man. I thought you were gonna be pissed at me.”

“Are you disappointed I’m not?”

“No, but I feel like you should be!” Jack exclaimed, and the warmth in Wilbur’s chest grew hearing how distraught Jack was over the whole thing.

It was oddly reassuring that Jack wanted to confess his spying to Wilbur. In a way, it almost made Wilbur want to trust him more, because he so clearly didn’t want to be doing it.

That didn’t mean Wilbur was going to spill all his secrets to Jack though. Even if he considered Jack a friend, he was still part of the Antarctic Empire. That was something they were never going to be able to get past. But Wilbur didn’t hold it against him.

“To be totally honest, I actually really appreciate that you told me that even if I already knew about it,” Wilbur admitted, smiling now. “But dramatic confessions aside, can we go inside now? I can’t feel my hands anymore.”

Immediately, Jack’s eyes widened as he scrambled to his feet. “Shit, yeah, of course. Here, let’s get inside before Philza executes me for turning you into an icicle.”

A few minutes later, the two were back on the main level of the palace, walking back to Wilbur’s room. Although nothing about his situation had changed, the waves in his head had calmed, and while the storm was still there, it was far easier to ignore than it had been earlier.

As they walked, Wilbur rubbed his hands together, trying to get feeling back into his fingertips. They passed by the library, not stopping since Wilbur wanted to go change into a thicker coat, but he ended up pausing mid step when he heard muffled shouting come from behind the shut door.

“None of you ever listen to me! What’s the point of me being here if you just ignore me every time I try to give an opinion?!”

Even through the door, it wasn’t hard to recognize Aimsey’s voice. Wilbur held a hand up to Jack to get him to stop walking, eyeing the library door. He’d never heard Aimsey sound that angry before. In fact, he was pretty sure he’d never heard them get angry before *period*. It just wasn’t the type of person they were.

There were some muffled voices Wilbur couldn’t make out on the other side of the door. Then, the door was sliding open, and Wilbur stumbled back as Aimsey stormed out.

Right before the door shut, he spotted three other flora gathered in the library. They ignored him in favor of focusing on Aimsey, who didn’t look back as they hurried past him.

None of the flora went after them.

“Aimsey, where are you going?” Wilbur asked after the door had shut, turning to follow them down the hall.

“Leave me alone, Wilbur,” they snapped, the flowers in their hair shrinking back.

For a moment, Wilbur considered letting them go. This wasn’t his problem. Aimsey was clearly upset, and wanted to be left alone. If he tried to talk to them, it would probably just upset them more.

But at the same time Wilbur was alarmed. This wasn’t normal for Aimsey. They didn’t get angry like this. At least not the Aimsey he remembered knowing on Eldingvegr all those years ago.

Wilbur might’ve been an asshole, but he liked to think he was self-aware. At least enough to know that he hadn’t been very nice to Aimsey since that first day they ran into each other in the dining hall. They had tried to talk to him again and again, and while he still wasn’t sure if he could fully trust them, he was starting to hate the fact that his paranoia was tainting every aspect of his life.

Today was already such a strange day for Wilbur. His honesty with Philza, giving Jack permission to use his name—why not listen to his gut and go after one of the only people on this entire planet that he could call a friend?

“Aimsey, stop,” Wilbur said, grabbing their arm and tugging them back.

Aimsey tried to rip their arm out of his grip, but he didn’t let go. After a few seconds of fighting, they let out a heaving sigh and gave him a pained look over their shoulder. “Please Wil, not right now.”

Wilbur recognized that tone. It was anger laced with defeat and the urge to cry, and he knew how much effort it took to hold all of that in. He knew that all too well, but it sounded so foreign coming from Aimsey’s mouth, that it was almost like he didn’t recognize the person in front of him at all.

“No, not until you tell me what’s going on,” Wilbur said, still holding their arm.

Huffing, Aimsey took a deep breath, their eyes fluttering shut. After a few beats, they opened them again, and plastered on a painfully fake smile. “I’m fine, Wil. Seriously, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Aimsey, you were *shouting* back there. I’ve never heard you shout like that before,” Wilbur pointed out.

The smile fell from their face at that. The flowers on their cheeks drooped, and when it became clear they weren’t going to run again, Wilbur let go of their arm.

“I just... I just don’t get it,” they muttered, cradling their arm to their chest. “I’m supposed to be part of this diplomatic party, but the other flora don’t listen to me. I try to give my opinions and I immediately just get shut down. They say it’s because I’m one of the

youngest, but I've been training to be a diplomat since I was a kid. I'm not an idiot. I *know* what I'm talking about."

Wilbur's jaw clenched as Aimsey took a shuddering breath, their shoulders hunched as they curled in on themselves. "I just don't get why I'm here if I can't do my job."

...well, Wilbur knew that feeling all too well.

"Yeah, I know what that's like," Wilbur muttered, folding his arms over his chest. "It's like no matter what you do, it doesn't change anything. You're told you're an important piece to this, but the outcome was decided for you before you even set foot on the board."

Aimsey nodded. "That's-" they sniffled, "yeah, that's exactly it. I'm not doing anything here, and it just makes me feel so useless."

At this, Philza's voice flashed through his head.

*"You don't know who you are because you've always been trying to be what others want, but it's never been enough."*

Then Technoblade's,

*"If you want Theseus to stop spending time with me, you're gonna have to take that up with him."*

And then Tommy's,

*"You gotta stop calling me Theseus when it's just us."*

Nothing Wilbur did was changing anything. He was trying so hard, but it was never enough. It had never been enough, not even back on Eldingvegr. He was always ignored, disregarded, or outright insulted. His presence was treated like a burden, even when he was a child. He always tried to be what they wanted even when they despised him. Because it was the only hope he had that he would find his place one day. Break himself apart so he could match a silhouette not made for him. Watch the pieces of his psyche crumble in his hands. Let the waves beat him down again and again and again until his pillar dissolved completely.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur said, digging his nails into his palm. "That's not fair to you at all."

Aimsey sniffed again, wiping their eyes before any tears could fall. "It's not fair to you either."

And it wasn't. Wilbur knew it wasn't. It had never been fair to him, but it was the card he drew in life.

"Sorry, I just-" Aimsey let out a shuddering breath. "Fuck, I just miss her so much."

Wilbur blinked. "Who?"



“Just someone back on Floslium who I haven’t seen in a while,” Aimsey said, giving him a weak smile. “I think I’m gonna go see if I can call them. It’s late over there, but they might still be awake.”

“That’ll probably help,” Wilbur muttered, although he was more focused on the heat in his veins melting away the ice inside of him once again.

“Thanks for, um, talking to me, Wil,” Aimsey said, taking a step back. “I’ll see you later.”

And with that, they disappeared around the corner, leaving Wilbur along with Jack once again.

Neither one spoke as they made their way back to Wilbur and Tommy’s room. Once there, Wilbur said his goodbyes to Jack before rushing inside, his head spinning again just like it had been before.

Aimsey’s words had stirred something inside of him. Reminded him of how useless he’s felt his whole goddamn life. How he tried to be everything Eldingvegr wanted him to be, but it was never enough for them.

Collapsing on the bed, Wilbur twisted his fingers into his hair and pulled as hard as he could. The flash of pain grounded him but only for a moment. He was too frustrated. Too angry. Too exhausted.

It was so much. The futility of it all. No matter who he tried to be, it wasn’t right. No matter where he tried to go, it was the wrong path.

The waves were deafening as he pulled a pillow over his face, and screamed into it as loud as he could.

## Chapter End Notes

so a LOT got talked about in this one! you don't know how long i've been wanting to talk about Phil's backstory. I've had that part of his character planned since november of 2021. NOVEMBER. it's been almost a year. holy fuck.

also the jack manifold conversation was entirely unplanned but i'm so happy with how it turned out. jack manifold underrated fr

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! please tell me your thoughts down in the comments below, even if I don't reply to them I promise I read them all and they seriously make my day :D

if you wanna see me talk a lot more about stars, especially with BTS details or worldbuilding stuff I don't get to talk about in teh fic itself, check out my tumblr under the tag #the stars and their children

anyway I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out my spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

if you're interested in hearing what i listen to when i actually write these chapters, I literally had [this](#) on loop the entire time I wrote this. it's a gorgeous ambient album and I think it deserves way more attention so go check it out

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# choking on saltwater

## Chapter Summary

Something inside of Wilbur has shifted.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi everyone once again I'm back with more of this!

I wanted to say THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR 100K HITS!! I know this fic isn't as popular with people as *World Forgetting* or *Clinic* were obviously, but it's probably one of my favorite things I've ever written. I'm so proud of this, and I really appreciate all of you that have been along for the ride with this very dramatic political story of mine lol

I hope you guys enjoy this chapter! ngl it was quite a challenge to write, but it's a necessary one nonetheless

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Time continued to trickle between Wilbur's fingers like blaziphane powder passing through a filtering sieve. It was both too slow and too fast at the same time. Every day felt the same, and Wilbur was starting to lose track of how long they'd been on Zephyr IV for. At the same time though, each second that ticked by was something he physically *felt*—another piece of stone breaking off his pillar and being lost to the waves that were trying to drown him. Chipping away at him piece by piece.

Sometimes, Wilbur wondered how he was still standing. And sometimes he wondered if he was even still standing at all.

Although he considered confronting Tommy about granting Technoblade permission to use his personal name, he found his words running dry when he was actually face to face with his younger brother. Every time Tommy would meet his eyes, Wilbur would struggle to say even a single thing, because Tommy had always been an expressive person, but Wilbur didn't have the slightest clue what was going on in his head anymore.

He could've been angry, but he also could've been sad. Maybe he was worried, or maybe he was disappointed. His gaze was stormy and his words were clipped. One wrong word, and Wilbur could completely shatter any sense of the fragile peace between them.

It wasn't worth the risk. If he asked Tommy about Technoblade, Tommy would want to know how Wilbur found out about that, and he'd have to admit he was eavesdropping on their conversation. Then Tommy would probably accuse him of not trusting him again, and Wilbur wouldn't be able to deny it because Tommy had a knack for telling when Wilbur was lying.

Yes, Wilbur would be lying if he said he trusted Tommy still. It was a slow realization that crept over him like icy water he couldn't get away from. Little things stacking up over time—Tommy and Ranboo's private conversations, Tommy's shift in perspective and saying that maybe joining the Empire wouldn't be so bad, and of course his growing relationship with Technoblade. Each one was a physical weight on Wilbur's shoulders, and even though he was trying to ignore it, denial could only hold out for so long.

A small part of Wilbur didn't trust his own brother anymore.

He hated himself for that. But then again, he hated himself for a lot of things these days. What was one more thing to add to the pile?

So he didn't confront Tommy about Technoblade. Instead, he kept the information tucked close to his chest, and ignored the way it festered inside of him like poison. He could feel the anger and paranoia seeping into his bone marrow like black rot, working its way through every cell in his body and turning him into someone he didn't even recognize anymore.

Tommy wasn't at fault for this though. Wilbur held onto that belief as tight as he could, refusing to let it be tainted by the rot like everything else. Tommy was a child. He was being manipulated by Technoblade into trusting the Empire. At the moment, there wasn't anything Wilbur could do about that. Wilbur just had to try and hold out. To keep an eye on what was important, and tug his brother back onto the right path when it came down to it.

Eldingvegr was their home. Philza wanted to take it from them. He couldn't let that happen.

Even if Philza wasn't going to harm them, he wasn't their friend. Even if Philza understood him like no one else, he couldn't be allowed to have Eldingvegr. Even if Philza was a mirror of Wilbur himself, he couldn't be trusted.

(Maybe that begged the question if Wilbur himself could even be trusted. If his own judgement was sound, or his goals were reasonable. But Wilbur refused to ask himself that, because he didn't know what the answer was going to be.)

Of course, there wasn't much Wilbur could do about Eldingvegr while Philza was still refusing to continue negotiations. So despite how much he hated idling about, he found himself spending most of his time in the library. The benefit to reading not only included the fact that it was technically research, but also it allowed Wilbur to get out of his own head, at least for a bit. His head was a decidedly hostile place right now, and any kind of escape from it, even temporarily, was something he was desperate for.

Except it was difficult to find peace in his reading when he was joined by rather unwelcome company.

“Can’t you go read in your own quarters or something?” Wilbur found himself asking one day, when his own reading was interrupted by a familiar pink-haired man.

“You realize this is technically my library, right?” Technoblade asked, raising an eyebrow at him as he settled himself in a chair across from Wilbur. “Like, I could kick you out right now if I felt like it.”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur fixed Technoblade with an even stare. “Then why don’t you?”

“Because I’m not a total jerk like that,” Technoblade huffed, settling his own holo-pad in his lap. “If you wanna leave you can. I’m not tryin’ to keep you here.”

“I want to read my book,” Wilbur protested, holding up the holo-pad to show him.

Technoblade blinked. “And why can’t you take that back to your room?”

...well, that was a good question, now wasn’t it?

Wilbur bit the inside of his cheek, fighting the urge to shoot Technoblade a dirty look. “I thought these were supposed to stay in the library.”

“I mean, they are, but as long as you bring it back no one really cares,” Technoblade shrugged. “Or you could literally just ask someone for a holo-pad of your own, and you can load whatever books onto it that you want. I gave Theseus one a while ago.”

Oh, right. Wilbur had seen Tommy with a holo-pad in their room many times now, reading the books Technoblade had recommended him with a kind of fervor he’d never had when doing his required reading for his studies on Eldingvegr.

For some reason, the idea of simply asking someone for a holo-pad of his own never occurred to him. At the same time though, he intensely disliked that idea because of how whiny it seemed. He tried to imagine himself asking Philza, *can I please have a holo-pad so I can read books in my room?* It would be like a child asking their parent for a new toy. Wilbur had no desire to belittle himself like that. Not when the library was only a few hallways down from his room.

Not to mention, if he left now, it would be like handing Technoblade a win. He didn’t want the man to realize how nervous he made Wilbur. If he could handle talking to the Emperor as often as he did, he could certainly sit in the same room as the Emperor every once in a while.

So he ignored the anxiety churning inside of him, and resettled himself so he was in a more comfortable position in the chair.

“While I appreciate the offer, I’m fine where I am,” he said coolly, eyeing Technoblade over the edge of his holo-pad.

To his frustration, Technoblade simply hummed at this before his golden eyes dropped back to his book. It seemed he was content to leave the conversation at that, and Wilbur knew he should be too.

But once again, Wilbur found himself struggling to focus on the words in front of him. It was as if Technoblade's presence set off a silent alarm in his head. His skin prickled, and he kept squirming in his seat, restless energy buzzing through his veins.

Even though Technoblade wasn't looking at him, Wilbur was convinced he could feel the Emperor's eyes on him. Watching him. Trying to read his body language. Was Technoblade wondering what he was thinking? Maybe he was trying to compare him to whatever Tommy had told him about Wilbur. He was sure Tommy had to have slipped up a little given how comfortable the two were with each other now. Wilbur wouldn't be surprised if Technoblade was noticing discrepancies in whatever stories Tommy might've been telling him versus what Wilbur was like now.

Or maybe there were no discrepancies. Maybe Tommy ranted to Technoblade about what an asshole his older brother was. Maybe he confided in the man about his lack of confidence in Wilbur's decision-making skills. Maybe Technoblade was trying to get Tommy to trust him more than Wilbur instead.

Even if Tommy hadn't said anything to Technoblade about what Wilbur was like, he was certain the man had to be in this library for a reason besides just wanting to read. There had to be an angle to this. Wilbur was sure of it.

"Prince Orpheus."

Wilbur jumped at the sound of his name, nearly dropping the holo-pad as he whipped his head up. "Uh, yes?"

Technoblade, whose expression was as unreadable as a block of ice, lifted his holo-pad above his lap, like he was holding it out for Wilbur. "We have another text from Themis, but like the last one there are also untranslated sections. D'you think you could translate this part of me?"

Well, that's not what Wilbur was expecting.

While a part of Wilbur wanted to be petty and refuse, he couldn't deny the burning curiosity at what book the Antarctic Empire could've gotten a hold of this time. He still had no idea how they were getting these smuggled texts out of Themis, and he was more than interested to find out exactly what they said.

There were two options he was faced with. Tell Technoblade to fuck off simply because he could, or find out what information the Antarctic Empire had on Themis. While the former option was certainly appealing, the latter held the possibility of giving him some kind of edge on Philza and Technoblade when it came to the sirens. Sure, it wasn't much of an edge, but it would be something nonetheless.

Sighing, Wilbur pushed up from his seat and took the offered holo-pad from Technoblade. He waited for the Emperor to turn on the recording, and then began to read from the text on the screen.

"It says, 'the strength a siren's Voice holds is influenced by both how powerful her mother's Voice was, and how much practice the siren herself has had. The greater influence of the two

is practice, but natural ability is nothing to diminish. The Royal Family are known for having some of the most powerful Voices of the entire species. Every heir also receives intense training with their Voice from the time they're old enough to speak, and it is said that the Queen's Voice should be powerful enough to compel an entire army at once if the need arises.'"

Technoblade nodded at this, his brows furrowed as he glanced at the holo-pad again. "There's another part down there, could you read that too?"

Eyes skimming across the page, Wilbur found the next section Technoblade was referring to and opened his mouth to read it.

"Although the siren Voice is almost exclusively associated with female sirens, that doesn't mean it's impossible for a male siren to use his Voice. In fact, it used to be commonplace for both girls and boys to be taught the vital skill. But then there was the brief-lived reign of King Bellerophon—a siren who used his Voice to compel his sister, Princess Antia, to kill herself so he could inherit the throne. When his treachery was discovered though he was put to death and succeeded by his cousin, Princess Lyta. As a result of this tragedy, the now *Queen* Lyta took it as a sign from the goddess Myscira that male sirens were not supposed to learn how to use their Voices."

Wilbur paused to catch his breath before continuing.

"In modern day, it is considered a cultural taboo for a male siren to be taught to use his Voice. Along with that, it is inherently more difficult for a male siren to learn the skill compared to a female siren. Use of a siren's Voice requires drastic shifts between high pitches and tones, which is very difficult for a male siren to achieve simply due to the shape of their vocal chords. For the sirens often called Daughters of Otrera—female sirens who were identified as male at birth—surgeries are being developed to alter their vocal chords to match that of other female sirens so it is easier for them to learn to use their Voices. Then, in the rare cases of children who only have one siren parent as opposed to being a full-blooded siren, it is found—"

Wait.

Wilbur blinked, reading the next line several times without saying it out loud.

As far as Wilbur knew, he was Technoblade's only way to translate this text. Of course this might not be true, but if it was, that meant there would be no way for Technoblade to check and see if his translation was accurate or not. And even if he did end up being caught in a lie, he could simply say it was a mistranslation. After all, he told Technoblade his Royal Themisian wasn't perfect. It would be entirely believable for him to mess up a line as simple as this.

Coughing to clear his throat, Wilbur took a breath before resuming his reading.

"In the rare cases of children who only have one siren parent as opposed to being a full-blooded siren, it is found that it is impossible for them to learn how to use their Voice," he finished, the lie rolling off his tongue with surprising ease.

In reality, the line had read more like, *in the rare cases of children who only have one siren parent as opposed to being a full-blooded siren, it is found there is little difference regarding their ability to use the Voice. If the child is female, she will be able to use the Voice as well as a full-blooded female siren, assuming she receives the proper training. If the child is male, he'd have the same kind of difficulties a full-blooded male siren would have, but nothing more than that.*

But the Emperor didn't need to know that.

Technoblade frowned at this. "Half-sirens can't use their Voices at all?"

Wilbur shook his head. "Not according to this."

*He knows you're lying he's going to call you out this is a test and you're going to fail-* the small voice in his head repeated on loop.

"Did you know that?" Technoblade asked, raising an eyebrow.

It took all of his willpower to keep his face neutral. "No, the Ambassadors never mentioned that. But since Tommy and I are both male, I just assumed that was the reason we weren't taught how to use our Voices."

For a moment, Technoblade narrowed his eyes at Wilbur, and Wilbur had to clench his jaw to keep himself steady. His heart was pounding in his ears, fear racing through him as he wondered what would happen if Technoblade found out he was lying.

This wasn't a risk he needed to take. They already assumed he didn't know how to use his Voice because he was a man. Why would he lie for no reason? This was fucking stupid, but he couldn't go back now.

"Well, guess that sucks for you and Theseus. But it also makes sense why Princess Myrina was so insistent that half-sirens like you two aren't 'real sirens' or whatever," he said, leaning back in his seat and taking the holo-pad from Wilbur to turn the recording off. "Though honestly, considering how self-centered the Themisians seem to be about everything, it's probably better that they don't care about you two. They don't seem like the type of extended family you wanna be stuck with."

Wilbur frowned at this. "You're just saying that because it gives you permission to do whatever you want with us and Eldingvegr."

"I mean, that's true, yeah," Technoblade shrugged, setting the holo-pad down. "But I meant more that I don't think Themis would be a very good place for you two to be. I doubt they'd treat you very well over there."

That was true. As infuriating as it was, Wilbur had to admit that if he and Tommy had ended up on Themis, they would be treated as burdens for simply breathing. Of course, Wilbur was used to being treated like his very existence was something unfortunate, but Tommy wasn't. He wouldn't cope well in a situation like that, Wilbur was sure of it.



“What do you care?” Wilbur challenged.

Glancing up, Technoblade raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by that?”

Wilbur resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I mean if there was a situation where Tommy and I ended up in the care of Themis, while you and Philza still had full permission to take over Eldingvegr, it would make no difference. You would get what you want either way. There would be no reason for you to care about how the Themisians treat me and Tommy.”

There was a hidden question underlying the one he asked Technoblade. One that Wilbur hadn’t even meant to ask, but was now sitting between them all the same.

*Do you care about us outside of our political situation? If you could get what you want, would you still care what happens to us?*

He didn’t expect Technoblade to care about them. There was no reason he or Philza should care about them, and Wilbur knew that. But Philza still acted like he cared. Wilbur found himself wondering if Technoblade was the same way.

A beat passed as Technoblade stared at him, reading his face like he was confused by the question despite how simple it was. After a few tense seconds though, he let out a breath and dropped his eyes.

“I know it might be hard for you to believe, but I don’t actually hate you or your brother. I’d rather you two not be stuck in a terrible situation like what you’d have with the Themisians,” Technoblade said, his face still unreadable.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “Bullshit. You don’t care about me, and you certainly don’t care about Tommy even if you act like you do.”

At this, Technoblade let out a soft huff, and shook his head. “If that’s what you wanna believe, then sure, you can think that.” He pushed out of his chair, and Wilbur stumbled back at the reminder of how much the piglin towered over him.

Shoving down the fear twisting between his ribs, Wilbur forced himself to tilt his head back so he could meet Technoblade’s eyes. “Are you saying that’s not true?”

Technoblade raised an eyebrow at him. “I’m saying that you’re not gonna believe anything I tell you,” he pointed out, leaning back against the table. “You’re not looking for an answer, Orpheus. You’re looking for confirmation.”

“It’s because I already have my answer,” Wilbur shot back. “There’s no reason for you to care about us. You want political power and that’s it. Just because you have Tommy wrapped around your finger doesn’t mean the same tricks will work on me.”

“So you don’t think Phil cares about you either then?” Technoblade asked, arms folded over his chest.

Blinking, Wilbur hesitated to respond to that.

“Of course he doesn’t,” he said after a beat too long. “Philza wants to control us. Both of you do.”

It was the truth as Wilbur knew it. Philza didn’t care about him. Not genuinely. It was another game and nothing more.

“Let me tell you something, Orpheus,” Technoblade began, taking a step towards him. “I know you won’t believe this, but although Phil doesn’t want to care about you, he does.”

Wilbur’s jaw clenched. “What do you mean that he doesn’t *want* to care?”

“It’s like you said, there’s no reason for us to care about you two,” Technoblade huffed, staring him down. “You’re only getting in the way of what we want, which is Eldingvegr. But you’re still here. Now why do you think that is?”

“Because it’ll be easier to have the support of the people when you take over Eldingvegr if you have Tommy-”

“Do you really think we haven’t taken over planets where the citizens wanted nothing to do with us?” Technoblade questioned. “We know how to handle situations like that. Sure, it’s not ideal, but it’s manageable. Especially with a situation like Eldingvegr, where we’d be saving your planet from Essempi. I’m sure after nearly two months of living under Essempi’s rule, your citizens would choose us over Dream in a heartbeat.”

That- no, that didn’t make sense. They needed him and Tommy. That was the entire reason Philza agreed to negotiations in the first place.

“What are you trying to say?” Wilbur asked, wincing when his voice wavered.

“I think you know exactly what I’m saying, Orpheus,” Technoblade told him, meeting his eyes evenly.

The underlying meaning of Technoblade’s words rang loud and clear to Wilbur. *You’re here because we want you here.*

Except that was impossible. Technoblade had to be bluffing.

Wait, that was it. Technoblade was bluffing about not needing him and Tommy. Even after suffering under Essempi’s rule, Eldingvegr citizens wouldn’t just blindly accept the Antarctic Empire as their new leaders. They would demand their rightful monarch be reinstated. They *would*. Wilbur was sure of it.

...or was he?

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur stumbled away from Technoblade, thoughts spinning too fast for him to form a coherent response. It was another stupid fucking game. Technoblade was messing with his head, trying to make him second guess himself and his own logic.

Fuck. He needed to get out of here.

Without bothering to say a goodbye, Wilbur stormed out of the library. He wondered if the man was going to call out for him as he left, but the only sounds he could hear were his own footsteps as he waited for the doors to slide shut behind him.

Jack was waiting outside the library as expected. He straightened up when Wilbur appeared, raising one eyebrow when he noticed the scowl twisting Wilbur's face. "Let me guess, you and the Emperor had a lovely chat about books?"

Wilbur scoffed. "Yeah, you could say that." Then, he turned to head down the hall, and Jack hurried after him as they left the library behind.

While he wasn't exactly sure where he was going, Jack didn't try to direct him anywhere as they paced up and down the different hallways. He curled and uncurled his hands into fists, his limbs humming with the same restless sort of energy he'd felt in the library.

It was just another attempt at manipulation. That's all. Philza and Technoblade didn't care because they only wanted Eldingvegr. And if they made Wilbur and Tommy think that they didn't even need to do these negotiations and could just take over anytime they wanted, it would make Wilbur and Tommy more likely to give into their demands.

Yeah, no fucking way. Wilbur wasn't falling for that.

Still, doubts now pounded in the back of his head relentlessly. He tried to ignore them, but the fog that had blanketed his thoughts for the past few weeks was dissipating more and more with each passing minute.

The storm in his mind was louder than it had been in a long time. It was loud in a way that didn't drown him, didn't push his head under the waves and made him succumb to the darkness. No, it was loud in a way that woke him up. That forced him to cut through the fog as icy water splashed on his face, jolting him from the inside out.

It had been like that ever since he'd listened to Aimsey's rant about always being ignored. There was something about seeing his own lifetime of struggles mirrored in his old friend that woke up the heart of the storm, making him choke on saltwater as he found himself fighting against the waves instead of simply surrendering to them like he had been for the past few weeks.

Wilbur was angry, to put it bluntly. But his anger had no clear direction. The winds would howl when he thought about Philza and Technoblade's attempts to manipulate him, but no waves would come crashing down. He kept trying to tell himself he was angry at them, because that was who he was supposed to be angry at. But there was something hollow in the words, even when they were kept to his own mind.

Lying to himself used to be easy. He wondered when that had changed.

As Wilbur paced without direction up and down the hallways of the palace, he heard another set of footsteps echoing from the turn ahead of him. He paused his walking, Jack nearly bumping into his back at his sudden stop.

It was probably just a servant. Wilbur knew that. But at the same time, he couldn't help but wonder if it was Philza or Technoblade. If it was, he had half a mind to try and hide behind a pillar just to avoid talking to them in his frenzied state.

The footsteps got louder. Wilbur found himself frozen in place, as if his shoes had melted into ice and were keeping him rooted to the floor.

There was a shadow against the wall. Wilbur clenched his jaw as the figure turned the corner and-

Ranboo. It was just Ranboo.

The ice around his feet thawed immediately when he spotted the hunched over enderian. In turn, Ranboo's eyes widened when he spotted Wilbur, and the two had a silent staredown (with Wilbur taking care not to make direct eye contact—even if he didn't like Ranboo, he knew it made enderians uncomfortable and he wasn't *that* much of a dick). The seconds ticked on, and Wilbur debated just walking past him without saying a word.

But then he remembered Technoblade's words. The bluff that made more sense than he wanted to admit. He stared at Technoblade's protege, knowing he probably understood the Imperator almost as well as Philza did.

Mining Ranboo for information in the past had worked fairly well. Even if he didn't trust Ranboo, at least not in the way Tommy seemed to, it could still be worth trying to ask him about his thoughts on Technoblade.

"Hey Ranboo, long time no see," Wilbur greeted, taking a few steps towards him. Jack, meanwhile, hung back to the wall, staying out of earshot.

Ranboo blinked, surprise washing over him when he realized Wilbur was initiating conversation. "Oh, uh, hi Orpheus. Yeah, it's been a bit."

"I haven't seen you around much," Wilbur commented, raising an eyebrow. "What have you been up to?"

"Just the usual," Ranboo shrugged, fiddling with the cuffs of his blouse. "Getting lessons from Techno, training with him and Tommy if I'm not studying, stuff like that."

Once again, Wilbur had to suppress a scowl when he heard Ranboo refer to Tommy by his personal name, but knew it wasn't his place to say anything about it at this point.

"Oh. That makes sense, I suppose."

A beat of silence passed between them. To say this was awkward was an understatement.

"Um, I heard about your, uh- well, I heard about what happened with Quackity," Ranboo stammered after a few moments, gesturing to the faded bruise under Wilbur's eye. "You doing okay after that?"

The black eye he got from Quackity was almost completely gone now, with little more than a faint shadow of it remaining on his skin. Still, Ranboo seemed to grimace when he noticed it, and Wilbur wondered how he would've reacted if he saw it when it was at its worst.

"I'm fine. It was just a punch," Wilbur shrugged, suddenly very glad that Ranboo hadn't been around to witness his breakdown firsthand.

Another silence. Ranboo shifted from foot to foot, clearly unsure as to what Wilbur wanted from this conversation.

"How's Tommy been?" Wilbur finally forced himself to ask.

At this, Ranboo frowned. "Why are you asking me? Are you two not talking or something?"

Well, not exactly. While they weren't giving each other the silent treatment, casual conversation was a rare commodity between them these days. More often than not, their room was silent even with both of them in it.

"Of course we are," Wilbur lied. "But y'know, you're his friend and all, so I figured you might just, I dunno, have a different perspective on how he's doing than what I see."

It was weak, but it was the only thing Wilbur could come up with in a split second like that.

Ranboo narrowed his eyes. "I mean... I think he's doing alright? He's doing really well with his training. Especially since he and Techno are spending so much time together these days."

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur suppressed his urge to scowl and nodded instead. "That's good," he muttered.

That didn't give him much to work with. Of course he knew that Technoblade and Tommy were spending a lot of time together. He needed to know what someone who knew what Technoblade was like thought of their dynamic.

The thing was, while Ranboo could lie to Wilbur, Tommy trusted him. He trusted Ranboo a lot for some reason, and Ranboo seemed to genuinely care about how Tommy was doing, especially given the things he'd said to Wilbur in the past. While Wilbur couldn't know this for sure, he'd like to think that Ranboo was a real enough friend to his little brother to not want to see him manipulated by someone pretending to care about him.

"Actually, I had a question about, uh, Tommy and the Emperor," Wilbur said, eyes dropping to the ground.

Immediately, Ranboo stiffened. "What is it?" He asked, wariness dripping from his voice.

"Just-" Wilbur hesitated, twisting his fingers together. "It seems like Technoblade and Tommy have some sort of... friendship going on. At least from what I've heard. But I'm worried."

"Worried about Techno and Tommy being friends? Isn't that a good thing for your negotiations?" Ranboo asked, furrowing his brows.

“That’s... well, that’s more complicated,” Wilbur said, waving that away with his hand, “but I’m more worried about it just from the point of view of being Tommy’s older brother.” He paused, trying to figure out how to word this. “He’s been through a lot. I’m sure you know that, Ranboo.”

Ranboo nodded slowly. “Yeah, he has.”

“I’m worried because I don’t know if Technoblade actually cares about Tommy, or if he’s just pretending so he can get close to him to manipulate the negotiations,” Wilbur admitted, pushing a hand through his hair. “We’ve already been betrayed once by people we both trusted deeply. I just don’t want Tommy to get hurt like that again.”

With a flinch, Ranboo folded his arms over his chest. “Yeah, um, I get that. I really don’t want him to get hurt either. He doesn’t- he doesn’t deserve to go through that again.” He paused then, glancing around the hallway like he was trying to make sure no one else could hear them. His eyes lingered on Jack for a moment, who was still standing far enough away so as not to overhear them. Then, he looked back at Wilbur.

“I’ve known Techno for... well, for a lot of my life actually,” Ranboo began, looking as if he was biting the inside of his cheek. “He’s not the type of guy to lie to someone’s face like that. He’d rather be upfront with what he thinks instead of pretending to care about them when he actually doesn’t. And when I see him and Tommy interacting, I can tell that he’s not just pretending to like Tommy for the sake of getting close to him.”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur forced himself to nod. “I know we haven’t always gotten along, Ranboo, but I can tell you care about Tommy. More than anything, I just want to protect him.”

“I know. You’re doing what you know how to do to try and keep him safe. You told me before,” Ranboo pointed out, voice getting a little more confident. “But you do realize that you’re hurting him, right?”

“You told me the last time we talked,” Wilbur said, suppressing the urge to flinch. “I know what I’m like. But like I said, I don’t have another choice.”

Ranboo stared at him for a moment, before something sad flashed over his face. “Do you really know though?” He asked, words much softer now. “You keep saying you know what you’re acting like, but I don’t think you realize the impact you’re having on him. Do you know that he thinks you don’t trust him anymore?”

Well, it wasn’t exactly a surprise. Wilbur knew he should be upset about that. That he should hate that Ranboo’s words weren’t a surprise.

But again, he had already been slowly coming to the realization that he didn’t fully trust Tommy anymore. It wasn’t something he was proud of, but it was a reality he couldn’t run away from. His paranoia and suspicion was seeping into every facet of his being. If he couldn’t trust his own flesh and blood, he couldn’t trust anyone, could he?

“I know,” Wilbur admitted, chest aching too badly to even try and lie.

There was a heavy silence as Ranboo stared at him with wide eyes. Wilbur plucked his glasses off the bridge of his nose and wiped them off on the edge of his coat, trying to ignore the blood roaring in his ears.

Then,

*“Do you trust Tommy, Orpheus?”*

Again, Wilbur couldn't find it in himself to lie. But at the same time, he wasn't going to spill the darkest parts of himself to Ranboo of all people.

*“That's for me and Tommy to discuss on our own,”* Wilbur said instead, putting his glasses back on. *“No offense, Ranboo.”*

Although it was hard to tell with his black and white skin, Wilbur was fairly sure that Ranboo was flushing. *“Um, none taken. Sorry, I didn't mean to overstep.”*

Ranboo had a tendency to do that a lot, Wilbur noticed. But at least he was able to take hints to back off when he needed to.

*“It's fine. I get why you asked,”* Wilbur said, pain still radiating from his chest.

Nodding, Ranboo was still shifting from foot to foot. *“Can I ask you one more thing then?”*

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. *“I might not answer, but sure.”*

Ranboo fiddled with the cuff of his sleeve again, before taking a breath and looking up at Wilbur. *“You ran into Aimsey the other day when they were upset. They said that you seemed upset about something too, especially after they told you what happened with them and the other flora.”* He hesitated again, before continuing with, *“I feel like I know why you reacted like that, but obviously I don't know for sure, so I'm wondering what that was about.”*

At that, a wave rose up inside of Wilbur, threatening to crash down on top of him as he tried to figure out how to respond to that.

*“What do you mean that you feel like you know why I reacted to that?”* Wilbur asked, his voice low.

Realizing his faux pas, Ranboo's eyes widened. *“I- I didn't mean that in a rude way or anything. It's just- well, Tommy's told me a bit about what it was like for you two on Eldingvegr, and- I dunno, hearing about what you said to Aimsey made some things click? But of course I could be wrong.”*

*“Fine,”* Wilbur snapped, the wave slamming down in his mind, *“if you know me so well, then tell me why I reacted like that.”*

*“I- It's just-”* Ranboo took a shaky breath, curling in on himself under the weight of Wilbur's glare. *“Look, this is just a guess, but from what Tommy told me, it seems like a lot of people weren't nice to you on Eldingvegr. You didn't have any blood ties to the throne like Tommy,*

so you got dismissed a lot, even when you were supposed to be training to be Tommy's advisor. So when Aimsey told you how they were being ignored and dismissed by the other flora, you understood what that was like. Am I on the right track?"

The waves were roaring in his head, and Wilbur could feel his frustration building again. Ranboo didn't know him. He only knew him from what Tommy said, and considering that Tommy was pissed at him, he doubted he was a very reliable source.

But still, Ranboo's words struck something in him. He didn't understand why he was getting so upset about this when it was something he thought he'd accepted long ago. He was always going to be treated unfairly on Eldingvegr, so he had to try harder than anyone else to earn his place. This was a fact of his life, so why was he getting so upset about it?

The energy humming through his veins was back. The anger was there, swelling in and out like the tides of the ocean deep in his mind.

"I appreciate your attempt Ranboo, but I don't need you to try and psychoanalyze me," Wilbur said after a few beats, shaking out his hands at his sides. "I'll see you later."

Then, before Ranboo could respond, Wilbur was hurrying off again as the storm in his mind spun his thoughts around and around at breakneck speeds. Memories flitted through his mind, mocking voices echoing in his ears as he thought back to the parts of his childhood he tried to ignore more often than not.

*"What are you two doing here?" The cook asked when she caught sight of Wilbur and Niki hovering in the doorway.*

*"Um, Lady Nihachu and I were just coming to get some bread rolls," Wilbur said, trying not to wince at the cook's piercing gaze.*

*"Didn't you already eat dinner?"*

*Sharing a look with Niki, Wilbur nodded. "Yes, but we just wanted a snack."*

*For a moment, it seemed like the cook was going to tell them no. Her face twisted into a scowl and she opened her mouth to say something, but paused and took a deep breath. Her features smoothed out again, and she let out a long sigh as she gestured for them to come closer. "Fine, we have plenty of leftovers."*

*Relief washed over Wilbur as he and Niki ran up to the counter. There was a basket full of bread rolls sitting right at the edge, and Wilbur grabbed two before stepping aside so Niki could do the same.*

*The cook wasn't smiling as they grabbed their rolls. Niki stuffed one in her mouth and took two in her hands, and Wilbur giggled when he saw how puffed out her cheeks were.*

*"Thank you!" Wilbur told the cook, turning on his heel to head out of the kitchen.*

*Niki also said something that was probably a thank you, but her words were muffled by the bread in her mouth. But before Wilbur could get a step out of the kitchen, there was the sound*



*of something crashing, and Wilbur's stomach dropped.*

*Twisting back around, Wilbur saw the basket had been pushed to the floor, with Niki staring at it in shock. He put the pieces together, realizing that Niki had been standing very close to the basket and must've bumped it when she was turning to leave.*

*The bread rolled across the tile floor. For a moment, the kitchen was silent enough to hear a pin drop.*

*Then, the cook spoke up.*

*"Look what you've done!" She exclaimed, her voice booming against the walls.*

*Grabbing the bread out of her mouth and tucking it between her elbow and her dress, Niki immediately said, "I- I'm so sorry. I'll help clean it up-"*

*"Clean it? You think that's what I'm upset about?" The cook shot a withering look at Niki. "This was still good food. My kids were gonna have these rolls for breakfast tomorrow, and now they all have to be thrown out. Do you enjoy wasting food?"*

*"It was an accident, I swear!" Niki said, shrinking away from the woman.*

*"Sure it was. Like I'd believe the word of a fucking marg," she snapped, and Wilbur immediately frowned. Marg was short for margyg, the High Eldingvegrian word for siren. While he knew Niki wasn't going to know what it meant, according to Eret, marg was a derogatory way of saying it. That meant this cook had just insulted Niki to her face, knowing she wasn't going to realize what it meant.*

*"Don't call her that!" Wilbur snapped, storming back up to stand next to her.*

*The cook's scowl deepened. "Don't think you can tell me what to do, örlen. You hold no authority over me."*

*Örlen. Outsider. The cook was calling him a foreigner on his own planet.*

*"I'm not an örlen," Wilbur protested, although his voice was weak.*

*Before the cook could respond to that, there was another high-pitched voice echoing from the doorway.*

*"Wilburrrrr! I'm hungry!" Tommy whined, and Wilbur turned right when he heard light footsteps running his way.*

*Tommy slammed straight into his legs, almost making him stumble as the six year old latched onto him. Wilbur's heart was still pounding from his interaction with the cook, but when he looked back at her again, he saw the scowl had completely disappeared from her face.*

*"Hello Your Highness," she said in a cheerful voice, bowing to Tommy without hesitation. "You said you're hungry?"*

*It was like a switch had flipped. The cook's anger was gone, and replaced with nothing but pure adoration for Tommy.*

*Twisting his fingers into Wilbur's shirt, Tommy nodded. "Yes please." His foot then bumped against one of the bread rolls, and his eyes widened. "Why is there bread on the floor?"*

*"Don't worry about it, Your Highness. A basket just fell over. Just a tiny thing," the cook reassured him, smiling at him before glaring at Wilbur and Niki again. "Maybe the margyg can do something useful for once and clean it up."*

*Niki flinched at her harsh tone. "Yes, um, of course I can clean it up."*

*Together, Wilbur and Niki picked up the bread loaves and put them back in the basket, even though they'd been on the floor too long to be considered sanitary anymore. The cook shook her head at both of them as she tossed the rolls in the trash, before reaching out to ruffle Tommy's hair. Then, she took one of the last surviving bread rolls and sliced it in half, before slathering butter and jam on top and setting it on a small plate for Tommy.*

*"How's this, Your Highness?"*

*Tommy grinned and made grabby hands at the bread. The cook laughed and handed one half to him, watching with warmth in her eyes as he took a huge bite.*

*"Thank you," Tommy said, mouth full of bread. He went to take another bite, but somehow fumbled his fingers in a way that led to the bread falling right on the ground, butter side down.*

*Wilbur winced, waiting for the cook to get upset and yell like she had at Niki and Wilbur.*

*"My bread," Tommy mumbled, staring sadly at the food.*

*To Wilbur's surprise, the cook just knelt down and picked the bread up with one hand, tossing it in the trash before handing Tommy the other half that was still safely on the plate. "Don't worry about it, love. It's just a bit of bread."*

*Tommy lit up again and eagerly bit into the other half. Wilbur grit his teeth as he put a hand on Tommy's shoulder, and began to guide him out of the kitchen with Niki following close behind.*

*They only reached the doorway before they were stopped by another figure.*

*"Lady Nihachu, why are you down here so late?" One of the ambassadors asked.*

*This was one of the older ambassadors that Wilbur didn't see that often. Her bright orange hair was covered by a shimmering, sheer veil, and the fabric rippled like water as she knelt down in front of Niki.*

*"We were just getting a snack," Niki said quietly, not meeting the ambassador's eyes.*

*The ambassador's voice dropped to a whisper. "Did something happen?"*

*Niki hesitated, biting the inside of her cheek like she always did when she was nervous. She glanced between Wilbur and the ambassador, and Wilbur could feel the weight of the cook's stare lingering on his back.*

*"I dropped some bread by accident, and the cook got upset with us. She said I was something called a 'marg', and then she called Wil an 'örlen'."*

*Immediately, the ambassador stiffened. "The woman behind you?" She hissed, grabbing Niki's shoulder.*

*With trembling hands, Niki turned and pointed at the cook who was still watching them, giving the ambassador a small nod. The ambassador's jaw clenched, and the cook's eyes widened as the siren stormed towards her.*

*"Is that true?" The ambassador asked, glaring at the cook.*

*The cook wilted under the siren's glare. "I- Well-"*

*"I demand the truth."*

*The kitchen shook with the force of the ambassador's Voice, and Wilbur pulled Tommy closer to his side as the cook's eyes glazed over.*

*"Yes, it's true. I called the siren girl a marg," the cook answered, her tone strangely flat. As soon as the words were out, the glaze in her eyes cleared up, and she blinked a few times before her face twisted into an even deeper scowl. "I'm going to report you to the King Regent for using your Voice on a citizen of Eldingvegr."*

*The ambassador scoffed. "You can go ahead and do it, the King Regent won't do anything about it."*

*"But-"*

*"I demand that you give an apology to Lady Nihachu," the ambassador ordered, and although she wasn't using her Voice this time, authority reverberated through her words all the same. "You insult the Emissary, you insult the whole of Themis. I'm sure you can understand the consequences that a grave offense such as that would have."*

*Despite her scowl, the cook paled as she glanced between the ambassador and Niki. Then, she took a deep breath, and dipped her head at Niki.*

*"My apologies for the offense, Lady Nihachu."*

*Niki opened her mouth to reply, but the ambassador grabbed her arm and started leading her out before she could speak. "You don't have to respond to someone like her, Niki. She is beneath you."*

*Wilbur watched as Niki was dragged out of the kitchen by the ambassador. Although Niki was looking at Wilbur as she was led away, the ambassador didn't glance his way once. Like he was completely invisible to her.*

*However, he wasn't invisible to the cook.*

*"Leave my kitchen right now, you filthy örlen," the cook snapped, making Wilbur flinch.*

*Wilbur didn't hesitate to grab Tommy's hand and run back to his room as fast as he could.*

The memory left a bitter taste in Wilbur's mouth. It had been an accident. A complete and total accident. The cook insulted both him and Niki, and only apologized to Niki after the ambassador had forced her to. And although she never dared to insult Niki again, it seemed her hatred of Wilbur only grew worse because of that incident. It was as if to make up for the fact that she couldn't insult Niki, she doubled down on Wilbur, and he ended up having to send Tommy to the kitchen to get things for him instead of going himself.

"Oi, Wilbur."

Startled out of his thoughts, Wilbur realized that Jack was tugging on his arm, trying to get him to stop.

"What?"

"I asked why we're heading to the throne room," Jack said, making Wilbur realize that he must've been talking to him this whole time, only for Wilbur not to hear it.

Then Wilbur blinked again, and glanced around to see that they were walking down the hall that led directly to Philza's throne room. He hadn't even been trying to go this way, but it seemed his feet took him there on his own, despite the fact that Philza hadn't summoned him.

"I..." Wilbur trailed off, unsure of why his instinct had been to go to Philza after his conversation with Ranboo.

Did he want to talk to Philza? While the logical part of him said there was no reason for him to see the Emperor, saltwater was pulling him down as his frustration bubbled under his skin. The waves were deafening, and he wasn't used to this type of suffocating anger. It was seeping into every part of him, and with every breath, it was filling his lungs more and more.

He thought back to what Philza had told him in the library that one fateful night.

*"I know what it's like to push down the rage sitting behind your ribs. The anger you hold towards fate for dealing you such an unfair hand at life, because something deep inside of you knows you're supposed to be more than this, but no one else seems to think so."*

The rage was there. It had always been there, but now it was drowning Wilbur. His chest ached, his head was throbbing, and even without the fog there was too much going on in his mind for him to think about what he was doing. He was tired but he was wide awake. He was sad but he was angry. He was a mess of contradictions that didn't make any sense, but for some reason, Philza could make sense of it all. Could make sense of *him*.

"I want to talk to the Emperor," Wilbur said before he could talk himself out of it.

He resumed his walking, while Jack hurried to keep up. “You weren’t summoned though. You can’t just go and see the Emperor whenever you want!”

“He’ll make an exception for me,” Wilbur told him, and although he wasn’t sure where his certainty was coming from, something deep inside of him knew he was right.

Although Jack seemed unsure, he sighed and stopped walking, tapping a small device that sat in his ear a few times, presumably to make a call.

“Hey man, it’s Jack. Prince Orpheus wants to see the Emperor,” he said into the device after a few moments. “Yeah, I know, I told him that. But just-” A pause. “Look, just tell the Emperor that he’s requesting to see him and see what he says.”

There was a silence for nearly a minute as Jack shoved his free hand in his pocket, tapping his foot against the carpet while Wilbur idled beside him.

Then, Jack’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit, okay, that’s great. So he’s in his office?” The person on the other line said something else, and Jack nodded. “Got it. Tell the guards we’re on our way.”

With that, Jack tapped the earpiece again, before focusing back on Wilbur.

“You were right. He’s in his office working on some paperwork, but he said you can come talk to him.”

Holy shit. For once, his gut instinct was right.

“Lead me there then.”

Nodding, Jack headed down the hall towards Philza and Technoblade’s personal wing. The guards waved them in without hesitation, and Wilbur couldn’t help but notice how much more silent it always seemed the second he entered this part of the palace compared to anywhere else.

Jack led him down a different hallway than the one that led to Technoblade’s training room. It was less winding and grand than the main hallways in the palace, although the ceilings were just as high as always. His and Jack’s footsteps echoed off the stone walls, and through the wide windows that lined one side of the hall, Wilbur could see the skyline of Zephys IV’s capital city glittering like rainbow prisms trapped in ice. The lights were bright, cold, and moving as if they were alive.

In a way, it was like the view of the city got more beautiful every time Wilbur saw it.

They reached a door that had no guards standing outside of it for once. Jack stepped forward to knock once, and Wilbur straightened his shoulders as the door slid open on its own.

“Prince Orpheus has requested to see you, Your Majesty,” Jack said, bowing deeply.

From inside the office, Philza’s voice replied with, “Very well, Jack. You’re dismissed for the time being. Someone will let you know when Orpheus returns to his room.”

Blinking in surprise, Jack nodded again, and gave Wilbur a soft nudge with his shoulder as he passed by him. Then, Wilbur found himself alone, standing in the doorway to Philza's personal office.

The office was somehow both exactly what Wilbur was expecting, and nothing like what he was expecting at the same time. Smooth stone walls were decorated with a myriad of paintings—the drastic shifts in style and color suggesting they were all from different planets. Architectural blueprints sat alongside woodblock carvings of mushrooms and delicate collages of dried flowers. A garland of ink black feathers and gold chain stretched across the room, small lights twisted into the chain to cast a soft glow over everything. There were also more of those floating lights that seemed to be so ubiquitous to the planet, going higher and higher up into the rafters of the room itself.

In the center of the room sat Philza's desk. It was built out of a rich, blue-green wood that Wilbur had never seen before, and was polished to a perfect shine despite all the random objects littering it. Papers, pens, empty cups and even random gemstones were scattered about across the surface of the desk, and Wilbur's eyes were struggling to take it all in until he noticed a familiar piece of twisted metal resting on top of a messy stack of papers.

It was Philza's circlet. The one that, up until now, Wilbur had never seen him without.

And then there was the man himself. Philza was lit up from behind by another window that sat directly behind his chair, showcasing the glittering visage of Zephyr IV's buzzing city like a living painting. His wings were stretched out so far, the tips of his feathers nearly touched both walls. He tucked them in a little as Wilbur stepped into the office however, pushing out of his chair to give him a small nod as the door slid shut behind him.

"Hello Orpheus," Philza greeted, icy eyes flickering over him like he was trying to figure out why he was here based on his appearance alone. "I wasn't expecting to see you today."

Stiffly, Wilbur nodded back. "I know. I wasn't expecting to see you today either."

"And yet you're here," Philza pointed out, folding his hands in front of him. "Is everything alright?"

Wilbur blinked, unsure of how to answer that.

"I didn't get punched again, if that's what you're wondering," Wilbur said, fiddling with the hem of his coat.

Philza snorted, stepping around the desk so he was standing in front of it, only a few feet away from Wilbur. "I figured that wasn't the case, though you've been known to prove me wrong before."

There was a beat of silence as Wilbur struggled to figure out what to say to that. In fact, he just wasn't sure how to continue the conversation in general. He had no idea what he'd been thinking when he decided to request to talk to the Emperor on a complete whim. He really didn't think he'd get this far.

“You’ve never requested to see me before,” Philza said when it became clear Wilbur wasn’t going to talk again. “Care to tell me what this is all about, mate?”

Although it was subtle, something shifted in his voice when he asked what Wilbur was here for. An edge softened. A shard of ice thawed. The question wasn’t demanding—it was surprisingly patient.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur took a breath to try and steady himself, but it did little to slow his racing thoughts.

“I...” He hesitated, raking his fingers through his hair as he struggled once again with words that used to come so naturally to him. “I’m angry about something.”

This made Philza snort. “Wow, no shit. Your feathers have been ruffled ever since you got here, Orpheus.”

“No, not like that,” Wilbur said, shaking his head. “I don’t mean me getting pissed at you or Technoblade or Quackity- none of that. It’s different.”

The smile faded from Philza’s face. “Go on.”

Wilbur took another breath, and he was relieved to find this one wasn’t as shaky as the last. “Once, in the library you told me that you knew what it was like to push down your rage. Because you know you’re supposed to be more than this, but no one else seemed to think so.”

“Yes, I remember that,” Philza nodded, arms folded over his chest.

“I- I don’t know where it came from,” Wilbur confessed, his voice cracking. “I thought I accepted things so long ago—my role, my status, the way Eldingvegr treated me—I thought I’d gotten over that.”

“You didn’t accept it, you just pushed it down far enough not to feel it,” Philza said softly. “But it sounds like it’s coming back now.”

Wincing, Wilbur nodded. “It is. I’m just- I’m so fucking angry but not in the way I’m used to. Usually when I’m angry about something, I yell or scream into a pillow, and then it’s gone. It doesn’t... linger. But this is different.”

“It’s not so much a brief flash of rage, but something that’s sitting in the background. Lingering in a way you can’t ignore, but not there enough to act on,” Philza offered, and Wilbur found himself nodding again.

“Yes, that’s it. And I just-” he paused, his breathing hitching as he looked up to meet Philza’s eyes. “Do you really know what it’s like?”

The question was fragile, and Wilbur hated how he sounded like he was standing on the edge of a cliff, ready to fall at the slightest push. But in a way, he was. He’d been balancing on a precipice for so long, but the winds buffeting him from either side were only getting stronger.

Wilbur's words hung in the air between them, stretched out across the silence like the chains and feathers stretched out above their heads. He hated this. He hated exposing himself to Philza like this, but at the same time, Philza was the only one who seemed to know how to put the mess of his thoughts into words. And right now, Wilbur desperately needed someone to tell him what was going on in his mind.

"Yes, I do know what that's like," Philza told him after a minute, tapping his talons against the desk. "You've spent your entire life trying to be what others wanted you to be, but it was never good enough. Even if you were the perfect child, the perfect prince, the perfect advisor—it was never going to be enough for those assholes. The game was set against you from the moment your mother married the King of Eldingvegr."

"But what do I do about it?" Wilbur asked, his voice cracking. "I can't just be angry about this for the rest of my life. I can't live like that."

Another beat passed as Philza stepped away from the desk and towards him. Suddenly, there were talons grabbing his chin, forcing him to look up from the ground to meet Philza's eyes once again.

"You've been dismissed and mistreated your entire life, Orpheus," Philza said, his voice dangerously low. "You have nineteen years worth of rage sitting inside of you. That isn't something to shove down, it's something to *use*."

Wilbur furrowed his brows. "Use it how?"

"Anger is a powerful thing, little bird. Let yourself feel it. Let it remind you that you're worth more than what others think of you."

But he wasn't. His blood didn't have any value, his skills as an advisor didn't give him value—without his title and the respect it granted him from others, he had nothing. He was just... Wilbur.

Another wave crashed down in his mind as if to directly contradict that thought. Despite the fact that he wasn't sure if he believed what Philza said, he found himself not trying to fight against the water. Against the anger rising inside of him.

He took a deep breath, and for the first time in weeks, it didn't feel like he was drowning.

## Chapter End Notes

this was definitely a bit of a more mellow chapter, but as always there are necessary pacing points and building blocks that gotta be put in place for a story like this. while we're definitely going to have more than 20 chapters, I now can see a path to the end of the fic, so we're in the last third of the story. hope you guys are enjoying the ride so far

<3



also I know we haven't seen a ton of tommy in the past few chapters. rn we've just been more focused on all of wilbur's other relationships, but I promise he's gonna pop up again soon. I am a crimeboys writer for a reason lol

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! I don't respond to most, but I read them all and they seriously make me so happy. if you want a response from me though, feel free to send me your thoughts in an ask on my tumblr! I have a few people who send me lots of asks about stars on there, so if you ever want more BTS notes or just wanna discuss analysis with me, that's the place to check out :)

as always I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out my spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# aching nostalgia

## Chapter Summary

After an unexpected revelation from Tommy, Wilbur finds himself dwelling on the past.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi everyone!

I'm so glad I got this done. I was trying so hard to finish this chapter before Twitchcon this week, and I made it! It was definitely a headache to push through this one, but I hope you guys enjoy it nonetheless

anyway, as always ty all so much for the love and support you've shown this fic so far! it seriously means the world to me :)

TWs for this chapter: drinking alcohol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Days after his talk with Philza, the anger inside of Wilbur didn't go away.

It was still there, the water playing out its constant push and pull just under his skin. But it wasn't as powerful as a full storm. The waves were building, but they were waiting for the right reason to crash. Wilbur still had no idea what exactly was going on in his head, but it was settling. Not into something peaceful, but something that was waiting.

Dread curled itself around his heart and between his ribs. Or maybe it was anticipation. He wasn't sure how to tell the difference anymore.

Either way, Wilbur hated this waiting. He hated watching the days slip by, with nothing to show except for his own shifting mind. Things with Tommy were as tense as ever, and in a way it was like their relationship was the same as the waves building inside of him. All of their interactions had frozen over, and Wilbur either had to wait for the sun to thaw it back into water, or risk taking a step onto it and let himself break through the ice.

One day, the ice began to crack.

Tommy had been out since that morning, which was their new routine that Wilbur hated. Some days he barely saw Tommy, and while it was better than the two of them outright arguing, the ache in his chest was only growing stronger the longer they went without

properly talking. But any attempts at conversation—even casual ones—were frosted over in a way that felt too wrong to try and keep going with.

Either way though, Tommy had been gone that morning, and Wilbur was debating what he wanted to spend his time doing that day. He could go to the library like usual, but then he ran the risk of seeing Technoblade again. He considered asking Jack if there was some place they could just go and hang out, but he didn't want to get him in trouble with any of his superiors for 'slacking off' or anything of the sort. If he knew where Aimsey was, he could see what they were up to but he didn't want to bother them if they were busy with their diplomacy work.

Of course, there was always the option to go see Philza again. But Wilbur didn't have a reason to see him this time. He didn't have a question or need his advice. Nothing had changed since that day in his office.

So why did he want to see him?

Instead of thinking about that too much, Wilbur laid out on his bed, hair still wet from the shower he'd just finished. It was difficult to find much motivation to do anything when your options were so limited, and none of them were going to help improve your current situation. Maybe Wilbur could just sleep. It might waste the day, but it's not like he had anything else he was needed for. He could change out of his day clothes and curl up under the blankets, shutting out the rest of the world and letting his mind go-

The door to the room opened, and Wilbur's eyes snapped open.

"Tommy?" Wilbur asked as he sat up.

"Hey," Tommy greeted, not looking at him as he made his way over to the couch. "Were you trying to sleep?"

Wilbur shook his head. "I was considering it, but no, I wasn't."

Humming, Tommy settled himself on the far corner of the couch, tucking his knees up to his chest. For a moment, Wilbur wondered if that was it. While he was curious what Tommy had been up to, he was sure the answer was going to be the same as it always was these days. That he was spending time with Technoblade. Wilbur knew he hadn't been training, because Tommy always took a shower immediately after his training sessions to get the sweat off. So they must've just been talking. Wilbur didn't like that, but knew there was nothing he could really say against it without pissing Tommy off.

Before Wilbur could consider if he should get up and leave to avoid the awkwardness entirely, Tommy spoke again.

"Philza summoned me," he announced, his voice flat.

And like a switch had been flipped, all the hairs on Wilbur's arms stood up on end.

"*What?*" He hissed, snapping his head over to Tommy. "Why? Did he talk to you? Was it just you and him or was Technoblade there too?"

"Techno wasn't there," Tommy told him, keeping his eyes fixed on the dead fireplace. "He said we hadn't gotten much of a chance to talk one on one before, so he just wanted to have a chat."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. He didn't like the sound of this at all. "What did you guys talk about?"

At this, Tommy shrugged. "Nothing important."

"You had an entire one on one conversation with *Philza*. Of course it was important," Wilbur pushed, the roar of the ocean growing louder in his ears.

"Oh, really?" Tommy finally looked at Wilbur, raising a single eyebrow. "Wonder what that says about the fact that you talk to Philza alone all the fucking time."

"We- We don't talk that often," Wilbur tried to argue.

Tommy scoffed. "I'm not an idiot, Wilbur. You're seeing Philza nearly every goddamn day, and you don't tell me anything about those conversations."

Wilbur clenched his jaw. "We don't talk about politics, okay? That's why I haven't brought it up to you."

"Okay, cool, well I didn't talk to Philza about politics either so it's nothing you need to know," Tommy shot back, and Wilbur heard another crack form in the ice. "I mean, why should I bother telling you what's going on with me, when you literally *asked* to see Philza the other day, and didn't even bring it up to me?"

Oh fuck.

"Who told you about that?" Wilbur demanded.

"Take a wild fucking guess," Tommy snapped, a challenge blazing in his eyes.

Taking a moment to think, it wasn't difficult for Wilbur to put the pieces together.

"You talked to Philza about me then?" He asked, the razor's edge in his words having dulled.

"A bit. But not everything in the world revolves around you, you know," Tommy huffed, leaning back on the couch.

Wilbur tried to quell the storm by taking a deep breath through his nose. It did little to help.

"What else did you talk about then?"

Tommy blinked. "Why did you ask to see Philza a few days ago?" He deflected.

...shit. If Wilbur told Tommy that he sought Philza out for advice, especially regarding his own mental state, that would spell disaster for the two of them. Tommy had been begging Wilbur to talk to him about what was going on in his head for ages now, but Wilbur hated the idea of putting all of that onto his little brother. If he found out he confided anything at all to Philza instead of him, he had a feeling it wouldn't go over very well.

So he kept his mouth shut, narrowing his eyes at Tommy across the room. When Tommy realized that Wilbur wasn't going to answer, he scoffed and shook his head.

"Yeah, figured," he muttered, turning away to focus on the holo-pad in his lap.

The air crackled between them, tension practically choking Wilbur as Tommy refused to look his way again. It was such a foreign feeling, to sit in a room with his little brother but feel completely and utterly alone. There was only a few feet between the bed and the couch, but it felt like an impassable chasm. They were so close yet so far away from each other at the same time. It made the ache in Wilbur's chest unbearable, and he knew he had to get out of there if he wanted to keep the waves from crashing down and drowning both him and Tommy with their force.

Pushing to his feet, Wilbur grabbed his coat off the closet door and tossed it over his shoulder.

"I'm going out," he said, his voice tight.

He waited for Tommy to ask where he was going. Even if it was a barb at how they weren't telling each other anything anymore, it would be something to show Wilbur that Tommy wanted to know what he was doing. That he still cared.

To his disappointment though, Tommy only hummed.

"See you later."

Wilbur stormed out of the room before Tommy could see him flinch.

Out in the hallway, Jack was waiting by the door as always. Wilbur assumed he'd been the one to escort Tommy to Philza, but lately Jack seemed to hang around Wilbur more than Tommy, and he wasn't sure if that was by orders or his own choice.

As soon as Wilbur left the bedroom, he turned down the hall, listening to Jack curse as he jumped to his feet to follow him.

"Shit, Wil, where we going, mate?"

"Is Philza in his throne room?" Wilbur asked, the deafening roar of the ocean echoing in his ears.

He heard Jack stumble behind him, but kept moving forward, not bothering to glance behind as his friend struggled to catch up.

"Uh, should be? But if you wanna see him, you should probably let me ask-"

“He’ll let me in,” Wilbur snapped, his hands curling into fists at his sides. “I’m not going away until he does.”

With that, Jack seemed to understand that now was not the time to try and talk to Wilbur, and shut his mouth as he hurried to keep up. Wilbur’s head was racing as he struggled to think through the frustration and anger clouding his thoughts. If Tommy didn’t want to tell him what he spoke to Philza about, then Philza himself was going to have to answer Wilbur’s questions. Because the two of them had an understanding. Wilbur knew how the Emperor operated now. Tommy didn’t have that same familiarity with him.

Philza could’ve threatened or taunted him like he did to Wilbur in the early days of their back and forths. Or maybe it was more manipulation, as if Tommy wasn’t already getting fucked up enough from Technoblade’s influence. So Wilbur *needed* to know what they talked about. He wasn’t sure why he was so desperate, but if he didn’t find out, he would go insane.

His footsteps echoed off the stone walls as he approached the doors to the throne room. The guards stiffened at his appearance, their eyes falling to Jack rushing behind him.

“I need to speak with the Emperor,” Wilbur said to the guards without any kind of preamble.

The guard on the right frowned. “Have you requested an audience with His Majesty?”

“No, but I’m not requesting shit. I’m going to talk to him, so open the doors,” Wilbur demanded, surprised at how steady his voice was despite the maelstrom inside of him.

“Prince Orpheus, you can’t enter unless His Majesty grants you an audience,” the guard pushed.

Behind him, Jack said, “Let me just send a message and see if he’ll see you-”

“No!” Wilbur snapped, stepping right up to the doors. “Emperor Philza! We need to talk!” He shouted, bringing up a hand to knock.

Before his fist could touch the metal, the guard on the right was grabbing him, and Wilbur yelped as his arm was twisted behind his back. Jack shouted something in protest, but Wilbur barely registered it as he was slammed against the wall, arms pinned and a hand on his neck.

“Prince Orpheus, cease now or I will have to place you under arrest,” the guard barked.

Wilbur struggled against the guard’s grip, pain flashing through his face and arms as he became far too acquainted with the stone wall for his liking. Before he could grunt out a response though, there was the quiet *hiss* of the throne room doors opening, followed by,

“What the fuck is going on here?”

Although Wilbur didn’t like the fact that relief swept through him hearing Philza’s voice, he slumped against the stone all the same.

“Your Majesty, the Prince was trying-”

“Unhand him right this second,” Philza hissed, cutting the guard off.

Immediately, the hands holding him against the wall disappeared, and Wilbur nearly collapsed as he took all his own weight again.

“Your Majesty, Prince Orpheus was trying to enter the throne room without permission,” the guard hastily explained. “According to regulation, we’re supposed to detain anyone who attempts to see you without your approval unless they are a certain ranking.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Philza muttered, and as Wilbur turned back around, he saw the man’s wings were stretched out even more than usual. His face then turned to something far more serious as he met the guard’s eyes. “From now on, Prince Orpheus doesn’t need permission to enter the throne room to speak with me. Do not *ever* lay your hands on him again unless I order you to, understood?”

The guard, who was now a pale and shaky mess, nodded. “I- I understand. My apologies, Your Majesty.” Then, they turned to Wilbur, and dipped their head in respect. “I’m so sorry for my transgression, Prince Orpheus.”

Wilbur nodded back, but before he could give a verbal response, Philza was grabbing his arm and tugging him away from the guard.

“We’ll talk in private,” Philza told him.

As he was dragged into the throne room, the last thing he saw before the doors slid shut again was Jack’s wide-eyed gaze, and the other guard still standing stockstill, as if they were frozen in fear.

When the doors hissed to close, Philza let go of his arm, and his wings sagged behind him.

“Are you hurt?” Was the first thing Philza asked once they were alone.

Although his arm ached from being pinned behind his back, otherwise Wilbur felt fine, and shook his head. “No, I’m alright.”

Nodding, Philza let out a short breath. “Good, good.” There was a pause, and then he was lifting his head up again, his wings following the motion. “Now what the *fuck* were you thinking?”

“What was *I* thinking?” Wilbur asked incredulously, the maelstrom starting up again now that the distraction with the guard was behind him.

“Yes, what were you thinking, Orpheus? You stormed up to my door like a child throwing a fucking tantrum, and demanded to speak with me while ignoring the warnings from my guards.”

“I needed to see you,” Wilbur said, meeting Philza’s stare without flinching. “And I didn’t want to have to wait for you to ‘grace me with your presence’ or whatever the fuck.”

There was a beat where Philza stared at him, taking measured breaths like he was struggling to hold his temper. Seconds ticked on, and Philza pinched the bridge of his nose, before straightening up and meeting Wilbur's gaze again.

"Alright, fine. What's going on?" He asked, his cool calm having already returned after that brief slip.

"You talked to Tommy today."

It wasn't a question. Philza didn't seem surprised that Wilbur knew, instead simply nodding as if he'd been asking for confirmation.

"Yes, I did."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "Why? What did you two talk about?"

Philza paused, eyes flitting over Wilbur's face as he considered the question. The last hints of annoyance dissipated, with a self-satisfied smirk hinting at the corners of his lips.

"I assumed Theseus would tell you all about our conversation. Is that not the case?"

No. No, it wasn't the case, but Wilbur didn't want Philza to know that. He didn't want Philza to know how tense things had gotten between the two of them, because if he was aware of just how close they were to falling apart, he would know that all it would take was a single push to get what he wanted.

"He did, but I want to hear your side of it."

The smirk on Philza's face grew wider. "You're going to have to get better at lying, Orpheus."

"I'm not-" Wilbur cut himself off, taking an unsteady breath. "I just want to know what the fuck you two spoke about, is that so much to ask?"

Although Philza seemed like he wanted to push the topic, the smirk still playing at the corners of his lips, after a beat of consideration he dipped his head. "I don't know what you expect of me, mate, but I just wanted to see how he was doing."

"Like I'd fucking believe that," Wilbur spat.

Lifting his face again, Philza raised a single, pale brow at him. "Why is that so unbelievable to you?"

Because the only reason he'd ask Tommy how he was doing was to try and gain his trust, or get information out of him. Because if he genuinely just wanted to see how he was, that meant he cared about Tommy, and in turn cared about Wilbur, neither of which were true statements. Because all of this was a game to Philza, and Wilbur wasn't ready to bow to a checkmate just yet.



“That’s not how you work,” Wilbur said, fighting the urge to twist his fingers into the hem of his coat. “If you just wanted to know how Tommy was doing, you’d ask me. But you summoned him specifically. You wanted to get in his head.”

Despite the accusation, Philza didn’t seem the least bit offended as he folded his arms over his chest. “Or maybe I just wanted to get a chance to get to know him. To see what he’s like when you’re not standing at his side.”

“And what do you think of him?” Wilbur asked, his voice tight.

Philza’s smile grew wider. “If I’m being honest, I’d have to say… he’s a lot like you.”

And that-

Wilbur wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting Philza to say, but it certainly hadn’t been that.

He and Tommy weren’t alike. Maybe in silly ways, like having similar speaking patterns or enjoying the same foods. But otherwise, Wilbur often thought of himself and his brother as the two separate sides of Eldingvegr. Sólsid and Nóttid. Day and night. Light versus dark.

Tommy took up space. He was loud and vibrant, and wasn’t afraid to make his presence known to an entire room. Wilbur never wanted to take up space. He would try to make himself as unobtrusive as possible, preferring to watch from the sidelines and see what others did when they forgot he was there. While Tommy would say exactly what was on his mind, Wilbur would keep his thoughts to himself. When Tommy gave out his personal name freely and without any weight attached to it, Wilbur guarded his like it was a precious jewel.

Tommy was born to rule a planet one day. Wilbur wasn’t.

“He’s not,” Wilbur choked out, after taking several seconds too long to respond. “He’s not like me at all.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Philza shot back. “Sure, when you first came here the two of you seemed as different as could be. He was loud and impulsive, you were quiet and always knew when to pull him back. Sometimes it seemed like he didn’t grasp how dire of a situation you were in, while you knew exactly how bad things could go.” Pausing, Philza took a step towards him. “But as I’ve gotten to know you, Orpheus, I’ve come to learn that you and your brother are two sides of the same coin.”

Wilbur clenched his jaw. Philza was standing right in front of him now, and his wings were relaxed, tail feathers lightly brushing along the floor. For some reason, Wilbur found it easier to stare at his wings instead of his face.

“You’re both stubborn,” Philza continued after a moment. “I swear to god, you’re two of the most stubborn fucking royals I’ve met—and I’ve been in this politics game for quite a while now.” He chuckled at that, like their stubbornness was something amusing to him. “You can be just as impulsive as your brother, and your brother can be just as controlled as you. And even though Theseus prefers action to words, he knows how to use his tongue as a weapon, just like you.”

This made Wilbur frown. “What makes you say that?”

Philza huffed. “Let’s just say he had some choice words for me during our talk today.”

Immediately, the instinct to apologize for Tommy rose up inside of Wilbur. It was a routine he was painfully familiar with. Hear someone complain about Tommy cursing them out, come up with an excuse for why he did that, and apologize on his younger brother’s behalf. He’d done it plenty of times over the years, and for a moment, this didn’t feel any different. His brother had insulted another politician, and now it was Wilbur’s job to smooth things over.

Except this was Philza. Etiquette had been cast aside long ago, and Wilbur knew he wasn’t the type to get offended by a few curses thrown his way.

But still, the urge was there, and it was strange how familiar it was. In a way, it made Wilbur’s chest ache. Tommy wanted nothing to do with him these days, but Wilbur’s first instinct was always going to be to protect his little brother.

“You’re more alike than you realize,” Philza then said, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur shook his head. “He’s better than me. Obviously he’s got some maturing to do but...” he paused, taking an unsteady breath. “He handling this all so much better than I am.”

The words slipped out without him wanting it to. He winced as soon as he said it, and kept his eyes on Philza’s wings, mentally cursing himself for another mistake.

But that’s what it was, wasn’t it? Wilbur kept making mistake after mistake. He couldn’t handle his emotions. His mind was a crumbling pillar, and he couldn’t hope to traverse the storm constantly raging between his thoughts. And yet... Tommy wasn’t falling apart. Not like he was. No, for the first time, Wilbur knew Tommy wasn’t looking to him for guidance anymore.

“He doesn’t need me anymore,” Wilbur whispered, so low that he wasn’t even sure if Philza could hear it.

It didn’t matter if Philza heard it or not, because it was something Wilbur hadn’t realized until he said it out loud. The confession was more for himself than anything else. A mental slap to the face, forcing him to confront what he’d already known was happening, but had refused to acknowledge until now.

Tommy going out on his own all the time. Tommy disregarding his advice and pushing for them to consider joining the Empire. Tommy not wanting to tell Wilbur what he spoke to Philza about.

None of that would’ve happened a few months earlier. Because a few months earlier, Tommy needed Wilbur to guide him through all those kinds of things. But now he didn’t.

“Orpheus? Are you alright?”

Blinking, Wilbur realized that he'd zoned out, and Philza had been speaking to him this entire time.

"What?"

Philza's brows furrowed, and he reached a hand out, as if to touch Wilbur's face. Without thinking, he stumbled backwards, the ache in his chest making his eyes burn in a way that told him one wrong move would shatter him into a million pieces.

"Don't- don't touch me," Wilbur snapped, his voice cracking halfway through.

His head was spinning again. It hurt- it hurt so badly it was as if his own head was being split in half. Tommy didn't need him. Tommy didn't need him at all anymore. Wilbur was supposed to protect him, but his efforts to keep him safe had just driven them apart. And now Tommy was growing up, while Wilbur was just making mistake after mistake.

He was supposed to be the older one. He was supposed to know what to do, and to always be there for Tommy. He was supposed to be his advisor, but in more ways than just political. He was supposed to guide Tommy, shape him into the best version of himself he could possibly be.

And here he was, fighting back the urge to let his political rival touch his cheek because these were the only kind touches he could get these days. In a way, he felt like a little kid again, wanting to curl up and hide from his responsibilities—from his *failures*.

One of his biggest failures had to be that he wanted to collapse right here and now. Because the large, dark wings that were arched above Philza's head again seemed like a great place to hide from the rest of the world.

But he couldn't do that. He couldn't fall apart.

So he forced himself to take a step back. And then another. He avoided Philza's gaze as he rushed out of the throne room, taking unsteady breaths to try and shove down the burning in his eyes.

Jack was waiting outside for him as expected. His brows furrowed when he noticed Wilbur's expression, but didn't ask questions. Instead, he fell into step beside Wilbur, and led him away from the throne room with quick, but calm steps.

"Do you want to go out again?" Jack whispered once they were away from the guards by the throne room.

Wilbur nodded, not trusting himself to speak just yet. Jack hummed before picking up his pace, and Wilbur let his mind wander as he followed Jack through the palace once again.

*There was a soft knocking at his door. Not the proper door to his bedroom, but the door that connected his and Tommy's rooms together.*

*It was late. The only reason Wilbur was still awake was because he'd been reading a book, the soft glow of his holo-pad acting as the sole light source in the room. His eyes ached, but*

*he needed to find out what would happen to the explorer when she got to the tower. He wouldn't be able to sleep if he didn't get to read what she found there!*

*But the knocking startled him out of the story, and he bolted upright in bed, setting aside the holo-pad to rush to the door.*

*"Wil?" Tommy's high-pitched voice called out from the other side. "Are- Are you awake?"*

*Instead of responding, Wilbur opened the door instead, and saw the silhouette of his little brother standing in front of him.*

*"It's late, Tommy," Wilbur told him, dropping to his knees. "Why are you awake?"*

*"I just-" Tommy paused, sniffing once. "Can I sleep with you?"*

*His voice was broken. Cracks threaded throughout his words, and Wilbur's eyes widened when he realized what was going on.*

*"You're crying," Wilbur whispered, feeling frozen in place.*

*Blinking a few times, he realized that he could make out tears shimmering against the blue glow of Tommy's freckles.*

*Another sniffle. "I had a nightmare."*

*Oh.*

*"Oh Tommy," Wilbur murmured, reaching his arms out and wrapping them around his little brother in the dark. Immediately, Tommy melted into his hold, his small head burrowing against his shoulder and skinny arms threading around his waist as tightly as he could manage.*

*"I had a dream that you were gone," Tommy said as Wilbur picked him up and carried him to his bed. "That you- that you left me and- and I was searching all over but I couldn't find you."*

*Setting Tommy down, Wilbur carefully tucked Tommy under the covers before crawling in beside him. As soon as he was in the bed, Tommy pressed himself to Wilbur's front, tucking his head under his chin like he was trying to be as close to his brother as humanly possible.*

*"That's not a very good dream," Wilbur murmured, keeping his voice low so he could hopefully coax Tommy back into sleeping. "Good thing it's not real."*

*"But it could be," Tommy protested, his breath hitching.*

*"No, it couldn't," Wilbur reassured him, bringing a hand up to thread his fingers through the five year old's hair. "Because I'd never leave you, Tommy."*

*"Do you promise?"*

*Wilbur could see Tommy's eyes glittering with unshed tears, illuminated by the glow of both their freckles.*

*"I promise."*

*Tommy considered this for a moment, before his brows furrowed together.*

*"You gotta seal it," he pointed out, pouting now.*

*"Seal it?" Wilbur questioned.*

*"Yeah, you gotta seal the promise so you never break it!" Tommy exclaimed. "Here, I can show you."*

*Suddenly, Tommy was shifting in Wilbur's grip, and he loosened his arms as his little brother scooted up against the pillows. He tried not to laugh as Tommy's small hands grabbed his face, tilting his head forward so his nose was pressed against Wilbur's forehead.*

*"I promise I'm never gonna leave you, Wilbur," Tommy told him, before pressing a loud kiss to his forehead.*

*Wilbur was smiling as Tommy scooted back down, burrowing under Wilbur's chin again and clutching the front of his sweater.*

*"Now you do it," Tommy instructed.*

*Nodding, Wilbur carefully placed his one free hand on Tommy's cheek, since the other was being pinned under his brother's head. He tilted Tommy's head forward until his nose was brushing against it, and repeated the promise.*

*"I promise I'm never gonna leave you, Tommy. I'll always be here for you," he whispered against Tommy's hairline. Then, he pressed a kiss to the five year old's forehead, laughing when Tommy giggled against his shirt.*

*"That was a good promise," Tommy said, sounding much more relaxed than he had before.*

*"Now, if you believe my promise, can we go to sleep?" Wilbur asked, his book completely forgotten about.*

*Tommy hummed, his breathing already slowing down. Wilbur took that as a yes, and let his own eyes flutter shut, his nose still buried in Tommy's curls.*

*"Oh fuck."*

Jack's quiet curse is what startled Wilbur out of his memory and back to the present. He blinked, finding that Jack had led him to a different hallway, but had stopped dead in the middle of it. Narrowing his eyes, Wilbur focused over Jack's head, and suddenly understood why he was frozen.

At the other end of the hallway, Wilbur made eye contact with Quackity for the first time since their altercation nearly two weeks earlier. Unlike before, when the sight of Wilbur would make Quackity grin like a challenge had just been placed in front of him, now he seemed to be at a loss for what to do.

The two locked eyes, neither one moving as they stared each other down. Seconds ticked on. Wilbur wondered if this was a battle, and whoever moved first was going to be declared the loser.

Maybe Wilbur should've been upset at seeing Quackity again. After all, the last time they'd spoken, he ended up with a black eye. But then again, Wilbur *had* been the one to start it. He'd shoved Quackity against the wall like he'd lost all control of himself. Wilbur had never been a violent person, but in that moment something had overtaken him, and it fucked things up for both of them.

They were both at fault for what happened, but Quackity had gotten a much more severe warning out of it. In a way, it was almost embarrassing how Wilbur had just been lightly scolded, while Quackity got a death threat for what happened.

"Quackity," Wilbur found himself calling out before he could think twice about it.

Immediately, Quackity's dark brows furrowed together, while Jack shot an incredulous look over his shoulder. He seemed like he wasn't sure how to respond, so Wilbur stepped around Jack, gesturing for him to stay back as he walked up to the man, making sure to leave a few feet of distance between them.

"Hey man," Wilbur said after another moment. "It's, uh, been a bit since I ran into you."

Quackity's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, that's for a reason. I'm not looking to get my fucking head cut off."

Wilbur winced at the reminder of Technoblade's threat. "Yeah, um, I get that."

A beat passed, the awkward air threatening to suffocate them both.

"If you're looking for an apology or some shit, you're not gonna get it. I'd rather we just stay out of each other's way, okay, Prince Orpheus?" Quackity then snapped, glaring at him now.

On another day, Wilbur probably would've told him to go fuck himself. Or maybe he would've insulted him, making fun of him for how easily he had withered under Philza and Technoblade's threats. That was what Quackity was expecting of him. That's what Jack was probably expecting too.

But this wasn't that day. Instead, this was a day where Wilbur didn't have the energy to insult Quackity for something they were both at fault for. This was a day where he was looking back at all the mistakes he'd made, and wallowing in his own self-misery.

He was too sad to be angry. That was a new level of pathetic, even for him.

“I wasn’t going to ask for an apology,” Wilbur quickly told him as Jack’s gaze burnt holes into the back of his head.

Quackity blinked, surprise washing over his face. “Then what are you doing?”

...shit. What *was* Wilbur doing? His chest still ached from the memory of Tommy’s small frame clutching his shirt, and the whispered promises they made to each other in the dark so many years ago. His jaw was still sore from how hard he’d been clenching his teeth, trying to keep himself from breaking down in front of Philza. His eyes still burnt with unshed tears, even though he’d long since gotten past the risk of them falling down his cheeks.

He needed a distraction. Something to keep his mind off of the angry fifteen year old waiting in their room, who was only going to be sitting a few feet away from him, but would be impossibly far at the same time. He didn’t want to see that foreign anger blazing in his eyes. Didn’t want to feel like he was staring at a stranger instead of his own flesh and blood.

Looking Quackity up and down, his gaze caught on something in his hands. His fingers were wrapped around the slender neck of a bottle filled with clear liquid, the label on the front written in a language Wilbur wasn’t familiar with. But the galactic symbol for ‘alcohol’ was perfectly visible over the letters.

“Are you drinking?” Wilbur asked, glancing back up at Quackity.

Frowning, Quackity turned the bottle around, like he was trying to hide the label even though Wilbur had already seen it. “What do you care?”

Wilbur shrugged. “I don’t. I’m just curious what you’re drinking, since I don’t recognize that language.”

Pausing, Quackity’s eyes flickered down to the label. “It’s Auranjecus—one of the languages spoken on Nona.”

Oh.

“How did you end up with a bottle of Nonan liquor all the way out here?” Wilbur asked, frowning at the bottle. “Did you visit there recently?”

Huffing, Quackity shook his head. “Not exactly, but I have my ways.”

Well... that wasn’t ominous at all.

“What type of liquor is it?” Wilbur pushed.

“Uh, it’s basically gin.”

Huh. While Wilbur wasn’t exactly a huge fan of gin on its own, he enjoyed it when it was put in mixed drinks.

“Have you tried the vodka here before?” Wilbur found himself asking after another beat of silence.

Quackity blinked. “Of course I have. It’s good shit, but it’s pricey right now, so I haven’t been able to get myself a bottle in a while.”

And there it was. An in that Wilbur hadn’t even realized he was looking for.

“I could get you a bottle if you like,” Wilbur said, knowing that all he had to do was call for a servant to bring one up.

“What?” Quackity asked, looking genuinely confused as he narrowed his eyes at Wilbur. “What are you getting at here, Prince Orpheus? Do you want me to do something for you?”

Wilbur shook his head. “No, nothing like that. I was just wondering if we could share a drink, that’s all.”

Behind him, he could practically feel Jack stiffen.

“Oi, Wi- Orpheus, mate, I don’t know if that’s a good-”

“Jack, I’ve got it,” Wilbur reassured, holding a hand up to keep Jack back.

In front of him, Quackity was full on scowling at him now. “Is this some kind of a fucking game? Because if you try to poison my drink, I’ll tell you now it’s not gonna work. I’ve been poisoned about six different times already and it’s never stuck.”

Wilbur blinked. “You’ve been poisoned six times?”

Quackity scoffed. “Yes, and that’s all the elaboration you’re getting. I’m just telling you whatever weird little plan you have going on in your head right now isn’t gonna work.”

“Quackity, there’s no plan,” Wilbur insisted. “If you want to say no you can.”

“Then I say no,” Quackity said.

With that, he brushed by Wilbur, knocking their shoulders together and keeping his gin bottle clutched to his chest. Wilbur sighed, the ache in his chest growing stronger as his only promise of a distraction walked away from him, and debated the risk of running into Technoblade again if he went and hid in the library instead.

Quackity’s footsteps began to fade. But before they disappeared completely, they paused.

Wilbur didn’t look over his shoulder, but he could feel Quackity staring at him. Silence enveloped the hallway, and Wilbur waited for the question he knew Quackity was going to ask.

“...if you don’t want anything from me, and you’re not trying to kill me or something, why do you want to have a drink?” Quackity then asked, his voice echoing off the walls.

Taking an unsteady breath, Wilbur dragged his hands through his hair, letting his shoulders sag with the weight crushing him from above.



“A distraction,” Wilbur admitted, staring at the plain stone wall. “I just need a distraction.”

Another beat.

Then,

“Fucking royals,” Quackity muttered, and the footsteps got louder as he walked back over to Wilbur. “Fine, we’ll have one drink together, *Your Highness*. But I’m only saying yes because I really want that stupid vodka.”

Holy shit. Wilbur didn’t think that would work.

“Oh, uh, okay,” Wilbur nodded, turning around to see Quackity standing behind him, arms folded over his chest. “Where do you wanna, uh-”

“My room’s not far,” Quackity told him, turning on his heel and heading down the hall.

And with that, Wilbur began to follow him.

As they walked, Wilbur tried to think over why he was going to have drinks with Quackity of all people. He could feel Jack’s confusion practically radiating off him in waves, and even if he wanted to give his friend answers, he didn’t think he’d be able to.

In a strange way, Quackity reminded Wilbur of Schlatt. Not that the two were anything alike, because they really weren’t. But the lack of bullshit was the same. Of course, Wilbur was sure the two would absolutely hate each other if they ever met, but he couldn’t help but get *deja vu* as Quackity led Wilbur to his room so he could drown his sorrows in a bottle of vodka.

After one turn, they made it to Quackity’s room. When Quackity went to open the door, Jack settled himself right behind Wilbur, as if he was preparing to go inside with the two of them.

This made Quackity pause.

“Guards usually don’t come into guest rooms,” he pointed out, narrowing his eyes at Jack.

Jack raised a single eyebrow at Quackity. “The last time you two interacted, you gave him a black eye. You’re fucking stupid if you think I’m leaving you alone with him.”

Even though Wilbur doubted that Quackity was going to try anything considering Philza and Technoblade’s threats to him, something inside of him still warmed hearing Jack’s blatant concern.

Before Wilbur could open his mouth to reassure Jack he was fine, Quackity shot back with,

“If I had a fucking death wish, sure, I’d use this as a chance to try and get back at him. And then you would run and tell Philza and Technoblade, and I would end up strapped to a goddamn guillotine, which really doesn’t sound like a great time for me.”

Jack blinked. “Well excuse me for being worried considering-”

“Jack,” Wilbur said, cutting him off, “it’s fine. Quackity knows he can’t do anything to me, so you don’t need to worry. I’ll be fine.”

Pausing, Jack’s eyes darted between Wilbur and Quackity, as if he was trying to see which one of them would win in a fight (even though they kind of already had their answer to that). After a moment, he sighed and stepped back, although it wasn’t difficult for Wilbur to tell that Jack wasn’t happy with this latest development.

“Fine,” he huffed, folding his arms over his chest. “I’ll call for the vodka to be brought over. Make sure to shout if he tries anything.”

Wilbur nodded. “Thanks Jack.”

With that, he stepped back so he was leaning against the wall opposite to the door. Taking that as his cue to go ahead, Quackity opened the door to his room, and gestured for Wilbur to step inside.

Quackity’s room—like Schlatt’s—had a similar layout to his and Tommy’s bedroom. The desk, chairs, bed, and the fireplace were all accounted for. But unlike Wilbur’s room, which was almost completely bare of anything outside the base decor despite the several months they’d been living in the palace, this space was filled with... *stuff*.

Although ‘stuff’ was a bit of a vague word to use, Wilbur wasn’t sure how else to describe the myriad of items scattered around Quackity’s room. There were several metal boxes shoved into corners, the contents inside completely invisible to the naked eye. The desk was littered with coins, expensive liquor bottles, jewels, and even pieces of technology that looked completely alien to Wilbur.

“Pretty impressive right?” Quackity drawled, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he set the gin bottle down on the desk next to the other liquor bottles—all of which had labels written in other languages Wilbur wasn’t familiar with. “Phil really rolls out the red carpet for me every time I stop by, as I’m sure you can tell.”

“I mean, Tommy and I are staying in a room just like this,” Wilbur shrugged, brushing his hand along the back of the couch. “I wouldn’t say it’s too bad.”

Quackity rolled his good eye. “Yeah, I know it’s not the worst but I also have a lot more shit I need to store,” he said, gesturing to the metal boxes. “I don’t think it’d kill him to give me a slightly bigger room than this.” Suddenly, he paused, something strange flickering over his face as he turned back to Wilbur. “Wait, did you say that you and Theseus share a room?”

Wilbur nodded. “We do.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Phil couldn’t even stand to give you two your own rooms?”

“Oh, no, that’s not it,” Wilbur quickly said, shaking his head. “We were offered individual rooms when we first came here, but we chose to share one instead.”

“...oh. Okay then,” Quackity blinked, turning back to the liquor bottles on his desk. “So, uh, while we wait for the vodka, is there anything here you wanna try?”

The abrupt subject change wasn't subtle, but Wilbur was grateful for it all the same. He glanced at the desk, eyeing the colorful liquids in their crystalline bottles, before his eyes fell on an all too familiar label.

Rushing over to the desk, Wilbur grabbed the bottle off the table, flipping it over so he could get a better look at the label. His eyes skimmed a familiar alphabet, and he eyed the shimmering, golden liquid inside, his chest aching with nostalgia.

*Blazihøn* read the label, written in High Eldingvegrian.

“How the fuck did you get a bottle of blaze wine?” Wilbur asked, using the Common name for the Eldingvegrian liquor.

“Surprised by that one, huh?” Quackity questioned, smirking at him. “I have all kinds of goodies from any planet you can think of. Blaze wine from Eldingvegr, mushroom wine from Kinoko, gin from Nona—I like to try new things, so I keep a collection.”

“But you don't have Zephys IV vodka?” Wilbur questioned, furrowing his brows at Quackity.

Quackity shrugged, leaning back against the desk. “I mean, I could *get* it no problem. I just don't feel like spending the money. Not to mention, you can get vodka that's just as good for way cheaper over on Serenity.”

“How did you get this though?” Wilbur then asked, holding up the *blazihøn* for Quackity to see. “Have you had it for a while?”

“Yeah, I think I got it about a year ago,” Quackity told him.

Disappointment washed over Wilbur at that. He stared at the bottle, running his fingers along the familiar letters and eyeing the way the gold liquid glittered with the blaziphane powder floating around inside it.

“Oh. I suppose that makes sense,” he muttered, setting the bottle back down on the desk.

Quackity straightened up at that, reaching out to take the bottle himself so he could hold it up to the light. “Eldingvegr's been on strict lockdown since the invasion, if that's what you're asking,” he explained, closing his bad eye to watch the blaziphane shimmer. “Blaziphane is being sent out, but the only ships being let in are Essempi military ships.”

Great. So nothing had changed.

“I'm not surprised,” Wilbur muttered.

There was another tense silence between them. Quackity set the bottle down again, making Wilbur glance up from the table.

“If you want, we can crack this thing open until the vodka gets here?” Quackity offered.

Wilbur shook his head. "I'd rather not have blaze wine right now. I'm fine with the Nonan gin if that sounds good to you," he said, knowing that such a familiar piece of home right now would send him over the edge.

Nodding, Quackity bent down to open up a mini fridge Wilbur hadn't noticed underneath the desk before. He took out two chilled glasses and dropped some ice cubes in there as well, before popping open the top of the gin bottle and filling both the glasses up.

Wilbur took the drink with a muttered thanks, wincing at the harsh taste when he had his first sip. Despite the bitterness though, there was something floral complementing it, and Wilbur moved over to the couch as he downed another large swig.

In the back of his mind, he realized he hadn't eaten anything since that morning. Maybe that was for the better. It would get him drunk quicker, and Wilbur really didn't want to be in his own head right now.

A few feet away, Quackity was crouched in front of the fireplace, fiddling with the dial to turn it on. Once it was lit, Wilbur leaned back against the cushions, watching the orange flames flicker against Quackity's shimmering tattoos.

The ink feathers against his skin danced in the light. It was mesmerizing to watch them ripple and move like they were just as alive as Quackity himself was. Wilbur had no idea what planet did tattoos like that, but he admired whoever the artist was nonetheless.

Stepping back from the fireplace, Quackity settled down on the opposite end of the couch from Wilbur. He took a long sip of his own gin, the ice clinking against the sides of his glass as he hummed at the taste.

"So," he began after a few beats, "can I ask you something, Orpheus?"

Wilbur noticed that Quackity had dropped his title, and while that should've annoyed him, he couldn't bring himself to care that much. After all, he was the one who had asked to share a drink with Quackity in the first place.

"Can't promise I'll answer, but sure," Wilbur nodded, taking another sip of his gin.

Swirling the gin around in his glass, Quackity was silent for a moment, and Wilbur waited for him to figure out how he wanted to phrase his question.

"A few minutes ago you said that you and Theseus chose to share a room. Is that because you don't trust the Empire?"

Wilbur had to suppress a flinch at the question. He'd thought that Quackity's subject change earlier had meant he was going to drop that topic entirely, but it seemed he was actually just waiting for them to get started on their drinks.

While Wilbur had no desire to share with Quackity the details of everything they'd gone through on Eldingvegr, he saw no point in denying him an answer outright. It was a fair question after all, especially regarding the part about if they trusted the Empire or not.

“It was... a mix of things,” Wilbur admitted, the back of his throat warmed by the gin settling into his gut. “In the beginning it was definitely about trust. When we first arrived here, Philza and Technoblade weren’t exactly welcoming. Not to mention, we’d just escaped a life or death situation, so my brother and I weren’t very keen on the idea of being separated from each other, even if only to sleep.”

“But you trust the Empire now though?” Quackity pushed.

Wilbur took in a measured breath through his nose. “We trust Philza and Technoblade to not harm us, yes.”

A pause.

“You don’t trust either of them with anything else though?”

This almost made Wilbur laugh. “Would you?” He asked, raising an eyebrow at the man.

Quackity snorted. “Fair point. If there’s one thing I know about Phil and Techno, it’s that they know how to get what they want, even if it means playing dirty.” He took a long swig of his drink. “I mean, shit man, if they didn’t play dirty sometimes I wouldn’t even be here.”

Wilbur perked up at this. Up until now, he’d been completely clueless as to what kind of business Quackity did for Philza and Technoblade. Now that he’d seen the man’s personal quarters, he had a better idea what his job might be, but he still wasn’t sure.

And since Quackity had asked him a personal question, Wilbur thought it was only fair that he get one too.

“What do you even do for Zephyrs IV?” Wilbur asked, dragging a hand through his hair. “You show up out of nowhere as soon as the summit ends, you clearly have an important role given that you work directly with Philza, but no one can tell me what it is you’re actually doing.”

“Phil didn’t tell you?” Quackity asked, a look of genuine surprise flashing across his face.

“He said you worked in transport, but didn’t give me any more details than that,” Wilbur explained.

Quackity huffed. “Well, I don’t wanna piss him off, so I don’t think I’ll give you a lot more than what he said. But yeah, transport is certainly part of it.”

Wilbur frowned. Transport was a part of what he did, but it wasn’t the entirety of it.

His eyes darted around the room again. They lingered on the liquor bottles from various planets, the random jewels, the foreign pieces of technology, and of course the large boxes stacked in the corner.

Philza’s work with Quackity was something he didn’t share with a lot of people. That implied there was something taboo there. That if outsiders knew what was going on, there could be consequences.

It had to be illegal. Whatever Quackity did, it wasn't within the constraints of galactic law. There would be no other reason for everyone to be so secretive about it.

Wilbur's eyes widened as the puzzle pieces fell into place. Illegal transport. Random items from all sorts of different planets. Fuck, he even had blazihøn, which was extremely expensive and very difficult to find outside of Eldingvegr.

"You're a smuggler," Wilbur said without thinking.

And to Wilbur's surprise, Quackity grinned at this, his gemstone tooth glinting against the light of the fireplace.

"Well, I can't confirm or deny that, but as long as I have plausible deniability that you figured it out on your own..." he trailed off, taking another sip of his drink. "Let's just say I have connections to some unregulated trading organizations."

"The black market," Wilbur realized, his head growing fuzzier the more he sipped on his drink. "Holy shit, Philza works with a black market smuggler."

"Hey, that's not exactly what we have going on, but I can't tell you any more details than what you've already figured out," Quackity said, his voice turning sharp. "We have a deal going on. I'm indebted to him, so I work with him to pay him back."

Suddenly, Wilbur thought back to the translations he provided for the Themisian texts Technoblade had. Texts he had no way of getting through legal means, considering Themis strictly forbade any information like that from being taken off planet.

Technoblade's voice echoed in his head.

*"We have our ways."*

"Were you the one who got Technoblade those texts from Themis?" Wilbur asked, straightening up in his seat.

"He told you about those?" Quackity questioned.

Wilbur huffed. "I translated parts of those texts for him."

At this, Quackity's eyes went wide. It was then Wilbur realized that Quackity might not have been made aware that he and Tommy were half-siren, even though he'd been under the assumption that everyone in the palace knew at this point.

After a beat of shocked silence, Quackity's eyes narrowed. He scrutinized Wilbur's face, no doubt searching his features for any sign of his heritage.

With a small grin, Wilbur held up his hand to block the light of the fire from hitting his face, casting part of his cheek in shadow. Admittedly, the glow was far more subtle than it would be had they been in proper darkness, but it was enough to show the soft blue emanating off his skin.

“You’re a fucking siren?!”

“Half,” Wilbur clarified, dropping his hand again. “Our mother was part of the Themisian Royal Family.”

At this, Quackity let out a high-pitched laugh. “Holy shit! Fuck, man, wish I’d known that before I punched you. Why didn’t you just go tell me to bash my head into a wall or something with your Voice?”

Fear lanced through Wilbur’s heart at this. “Uh, I don’t know how to use my Voice, and neither does Tommy.”

The borderline hysterical smile on Quackity’s face disappeared, and Wilbur tried not to shrink back as his eyes narrowed again. “Why not?”

“They don’t teach men how to use their Voices,” Wilbur told him, focusing on his gin. “Not to mention, I don’t think half-sirens even have the ability to use their Voice.”

Quackity was quiet for a moment at this. Wilbur risked a glance up, and saw that he was staring at him, as if he was trying to pick apart Wilbur’s brain with his eyes alone. He forced himself to keep a neutral face. There was no way for Quackity to know he was lying. Even if he knew that half-sirens actually did have the ability to use their Voice, he couldn’t prove that Wilbur had been taught how to use his.

A few moments passed, the seconds ticking down with painful slowness.

Then, Quackity let out a breath and shook his head. “That sucks. To be so close to having a power like that, but so far at the same time.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur agreed, finishing the last of his gin. “It sucks.”

Another beat passed. Quackity’s glass clinked with ice as he finished his own drink as well.

“You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to smuggle shit off Themis though, man,” Quackity then said, reaching for the bottle and refilling both his and Wilbur’s glasses. “The shit I had to do was insane.”

Muttering a thanks for the drink, Wilbur’s head was sufficiently fuzzy as he glanced up at him. “What did you have to do?”

Pausing, Quackity raised an eyebrow at him. “You really wanna know?”

Grinning again, Wilbur nodded. “Regale me with your smuggling stories, Quackity.”

And that was all the encouragement Quackity seemed to need.

The next few hours were spent in a haze of listening to Quackity talk about his smuggling exploits as they downed the rest of the gin, and then the vodka when it was brought to the room. The fireplace was bright, and the ache inside of Wilbur’s chest was dulled by the

alcohol. The storm in his mind had quieted, and Wilbur felt more relaxed than he had been in months.

His limbs were slack, and his tongue got loose. He laughed at Quackity's wild tales, almost choking on his own drink several times over as he learned more about the man than he ever expected to. It turned out that Quackity had an entire crew he ran his smuggling business with, and they flew from planet to planet, picking up highly illegal packages and moving them from one black market to another. If there was a go to man in the smuggling industry, it was Quackity.

As the evening passed on though, Wilbur's laughter began to fade. It wasn't for lack of Quackity's stories. He had plenty to tell, and each one was more entertaining than the last. But as Wilbur continued to drink, a deep, bone-chilling sadness rose up inside of him. The heaviness in his mind was only matched by the weight on his shoulders, and he couldn't help but think how much Tommy would love to be here right now. How hard he'd laugh at Quackity's jokes, and how cool he would find the entire business Quackity had found himself in.

Quackity seemed to notice Wilbur's somber mood. His own jokes petered out, and the two found themselves in silence for the first time in hours as Wilbur reached to pour himself yet another glass of vodka.

"Hey, Orpheus," Quackity said once Wilbur had finished refilling his glass. "Can I ask you something, uh, a bit personal?"

"Go for it," Wilbur slurred, slumping back against the couch and nearly spilling his vodka on his shirt.

Blinking a few times like he was struggling to get his bearings, Quackity then asked, "Why did you need a distraction tonight?"

Wilbur couldn't help but laugh at the question, because he knew it was coming. Of course Quackity would want to know what made him so desperate to get out of his head, that he invited the guy who punched him in the face for drinks. It was pathetic, but then again, it's not like he had much of a face to save at this point.

"Because I'm sad, Quackity," Wilbur told him, his mind stumbling over his own thoughts. "I realized something today, and it made me really fucking sad."

Quackity straightened up. "What did you realize?"

A bitter laugh bubbled out of Wilbur's chest. "He doesn't need me anymore," he said, his tongue heavy as the truth slipped off of it. "My little brother doesn't need me because he's grown up, and it makes me really sad because he's too young for that shit."

A frown flickered across Quackity's face, but now that the words had started, Wilbur couldn't stop them.



“I was supposed to- to be there for him,” Wilbur told him, hiccuping mid sentence. “I’m his advisor. I’m the one who has to guide him and all that shit. But I suck at it. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing and Tommy knows, and he hates me for it.”

“How do you know he hates you?” Quackity asked, his voice quiet.

“I mean- maybe he doesn’t,” Wilbur acquiesced. “But he should. I’m useless to him. I’m supposed to be helping him but I’m too much of a fucking prick to even do that right.” He laughed again, although it sounded more like a strangled sob despite the fact that his eyes were dry. “I- I miss him so much, y’know? Which is weird because we’re literally sharing a room. I see him every night. But I feel like we’re so far apart these days and I hate it. But I’m the one who did that. I drove him away because I don’t want him to get dragged down by my shit.”

“Uh, we can change the subject, man. I didn’t mean to bring up-”

“It’s my own fault,” Wilbur muttered, ignoring Quackity completely now. “I did this. I drove him away and forced him to grow up. I was trying to protect him- I’m still trying to protect him. But everything’s just- it’s so tiring and fucking complicated. I don’t know what the right thing is anymore. And I feel like I’m a completely different person than I was when we first got here.”

From the corner of his eye, Wilbur could see Quackity had grabbed the vodka bottle, and was now drinking straight from it.

“I practically raised him,” Wilbur slurred, his words not even making sense to himself anymore. “He’s my baby brother, I’ve known him since he was born, and I feel like he’s a complete stranger to me now. But maybe... I dunno, maybe he didn’t change. I think I’m the one that’s changed.”

The ache in his chest was unbearable now, having come back full force with the weight of his admission. He was an idiot for thinking that drinking would help, because now he was just even more sad than he would’ve been sober. His head was spinning as he thought back to Tommy’s cold looks and harsh words. He cringed when he remembered his own sharp voice and the paranoia that clouded every interaction he had.

He missed Tommy. He missed Tommy so much, it was like a hole had been carved where his heart should be. And instead of trying to reach out and fix his mistakes, he was drinking himself into stupidity with a man who was the furthest thing from a friend to him.

Fuck. He was so pathetic.

## Chapter End Notes

quackity did not sign up to be a therapist you guys he's so tired

anyway I hope you guys enjoyed that one! definitely more of a transition focused chapter, but I hope it was interesting nonetheless. we finally got some more insight on quackity too. he's so much fun for me to write.

now announcement time! I wanna let you guys know in advance I'm going to twitchcon san diego this week, and I don't expect to get any writing done while i'm there. so if there's a delay in updates, that's why. but on the PLUS side, if you guys wanna see what I'm up to while I'm there make sure to check out my [twitter](#) and MORE importantly, make sure to follow my dear friend roxy thanotaphobia on their [twitch](#) because at some point during the con, I'm gonna be on one of their streams! it'll be me, [roxy](#) (obviously), [birdfeet](#), and [meridies](#) all hanging out in our airbnb and having a fun time! we're all mcyt fic authors so if you don't know them, make sure to check out their ao3s which I linked. they're all amazing authors, and we're gonna be having a fun time goofing around together on stream.

(also, if you're going to twitchcon SD and wanna say hi to me, feel free to hmu on twitter!)

ok that's all the announcements for now. please leave a comment if you enjoyed, they seriously make my day :)

as always I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

the spotify playlist for this fic can be found [here](#)!

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees <3

# vodka burns for a reason

## Chapter Summary

The consequences of Wilbur's impromptu drinking session.

## Chapter Notes

hi hi everyone i'm back with more of this! sorry for the extended wait between chapters, I mentioned last chapter I was going to twitchcon so that definitely exhausted me lol. had a really great time though! (yes, despite what a mess the whole thing was I still enjoyed a lot of aspects of it and I'm unbelievably glad I got to spend 5 whole days with my best friends)

anyway, we're back with another chapter! hope you guys enjoy this one, and ty for the love you give this fic as always :)

TWs: character being very drunk, hangover symptoms, references to past workplace abuse

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a knock at the door.

Wilbur was still slumped against Quackity's couch, his head spinning as the vodka tied his stomach into knots. Quackity had already finished the bottle, and the dancing flames from the fireplace flickered against the reflection of the glass, casting strange shadows on the wall that hurt Wilbur's head to look at for too long.

"Who is that?" Wilbur slurred, his chest still aching from all the emotions he'd spilled into the air between him and Quackity.

Quackity didn't respond. Instead, he just pushed to his feet with a loud groan, and stumbled towards the door to open it. Wilbur rolled over, head resting on the arm of the couch as he narrowed his eyes, struggling to make out the blurry shapes in the doorway through the haze that had settled over his mind.

"Look man, *he* asked *me* to have a drink with him. I didn't think he was gonna get fucking wasted," Quackity told the figure in front of him. Somehow, despite having finished most of that vodka bottle by himself, Quackity still sounded far more sober than Wilbur was at the moment.

“How much has he had?” A gruff voice asked, and an alarm began to ring in the back of Wilbur’s head, but he was too out of it to recognize who it was.

“About half a bottle of Nonan gin, and half of a bottle of Antarctic vodka,” Quackity explained, swaying slightly in place.

Wilbur heard the blurry figure sigh. “Alright, thanks for letting me know. I’ll get him back to his room.”

“Thank fucking god,” Quackity muttered, stepping out of the doorway to let the person in.

When the light from the fire hit the person’s face, he groaned loudly and buried his face in the couch cushion behind him. Of course this was who had to show up.

“Why the fuck are you here?”

“Quackity called,” Technoblade explained, footsteps thudding against the stone. “You gotta get back to your room, Orpheus.”

“Where’s Jack?” He asked, his voice muffled by the fabric.

“His shift ended hours ago. He wanted to wait for you, but I made him go back to the guard barracks to sleep.”

Fuck. Wilbur hadn’t even thought about Jack’s shift ending. Of course he’d want to wait for Wilbur. But he was too busy being caught up in his own self-loathing to think about other people like that.

The ache in his chest made itself known again with another stabbing pain. He let out a strange whimper, head swirling with the lingering remnants of the vodka in his system. The air was thick with tension from the unplanned confessional he had with Quackity, and he knew he was going to hate himself in the morning for all of this, but right now he couldn’t bring himself to even try and act dignified. So instead of sitting up and going with Technoblade willingly, he sniffled and wrapped his arms around the couch cushion, not wanting to meet Technoblade’s eyes right now.

“Orpheus,” Technoblade said, sounding much closer now. “You gotta get up.”

“I don’t want to,” Wilbur mumbled. “‘M tired.”

Letting out a breath through his nose, Technoblade’s hand fell on Wilbur’s shoulder, the sudden touch making him jolt. “You can’t sleep here.”

Wilbur stayed silent.

“If you don’t get up I’m gonna carry you out, and I don’t think either of us wants to do that,” Technoblade warned him.

Shit.

“Don’t even fucking try it,” Wilbur grumbled, forcing himself up with a heaving grunt.

Technoblade stepped back, watching as Wilbur forced himself to his feet. As soon as he was standing, the blood rushed out of his head, making black dots dance around his vision. He swayed to the side as his balance tipped, and the only reason he didn’t fall over was because of a warm hand grabbing his arm.

“C’mon kid,” Technoblade said, pulling Wilbur back upright, “you can’t pass out yet.”

Despite how badly Wilbur wanted to yank his arm away from Technoblade’s grip, he knew that if he did, he’d end up face planting into the floor. So instead, Wilbur decided fuck it, and let himself lean against Technoblade’s side for support.

Technoblade stiffened at the contact, but didn’t move away. Instead, after a beat of hesitation, he wrapped an arm around Wilbur’s shoulders to keep him standing, and Wilbur was too tired to make a fuss about it.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” Technoblade warned Quackity, his voice low.

“Who the fuck am I gonna tell? The guards?” Quackity scoffed, shaking his head. “Trust me, I wanna forget this night happened just as much as Orpheus probably does.”

From where his face was half-buried in Technoblade’s shoulder, Wilbur managed to make a noise of agreement. Then, Technoblade was hauling him out of the room, and Wilbur took a deep breath to try and steady himself as the Emperor led him out into the hallway.

Quackity’s door hissed shut behind them. The inside of Quackity’s room had been warmed by the fire, but the moment they left, Wilbur was slapped in the face with the permanent chill that seemed to wind its way through the halls of the palace. A shiver ran down his spine, and he pressed further into Technoblade’s side without thinking. Technoblade didn’t say anything, but Wilbur could’ve sworn he tightened the arm he was using to hold Wilbur up all the same.

There was so much going on right now that Wilbur knew he should be upset about. Quackity calling Technoblade to come pick him up, Technoblade practically having to carry him, his own lack of resistance to the Emperor’s help—he shouldn’t accept this all so easily. This was humiliating on so many levels, and any respect Technoblade might’ve still had for him was definitely gone now.

But Wilbur was too out of it to even care. His thoughts slipped between his fingers like sand, and while the waves were still lapping at the shores of his mind, they were quieter than they’d been in ages. It was too difficult to think when everything was so... swirly. All he could do was surrender to the spinning, and forget about the consequences for the time being.

Right now, all he had to focus on was putting one foot in front of the other. And, well, that was a lot easier said than done.

“Hey, c’mon, you’re dragging your feet,” Technoblade huffed when Wilbur stumbled for the fifth time since leaving Quackity’s room.

“I’m trying,” Wilbur mumbled, cursing when he tripped over his own shoe.

Technoblade yanked him up before he could fall, but didn’t start walking again once Wilbur had regained his footing.

“Why aren’t we going?” Wilbur asked, trying to take another step forward before being stopped by the arm around him.

He looked up at Technoblade, having to squint to get his eyes to focus on the man’s face. Although it was difficult to see in the shadowy hall, he could just make out a crease between Technoblade’s eyebrows.

There was a beat of silence as Technoblade stared at the wall. Wilbur swayed from foot to foot, the waves inside his mind rocking him back and forth as if he was on a boat.

Then, after what felt like eons but was probably only a few seconds, Technoblade sighed.

“I’m gonna have to carry you,” he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Despite how drunk he was, Wilbur was still self-aware enough to know he didn’t want that.

“Fuck you,” Wilbur slurred, trying to take a step away from Technoblade. “Don’t- Don’t you fucking try it.”

Right as he tried to move back though, he found himself stumbling over his own feet again. He tipped backwards, his vision spinning in circles as the boat began to capsize.

Except instead of being met with cold stone floor, Wilbur found himself being lifted away from the ground entirely. He let out a squawk of protest, fighting in Technoblade’s grip, but his struggle was about as effective as trying to punch a brick wall would be. His hold didn’t loosen, and Wilbur found himself being scooped up into Technoblade’s arms with the ease of someone lifting a bag of feathers.

“Look, I don’t wanna do this either, but it’s gonna take us years to get to your room at the rate you’re walkin’,” Technoblade told Wilbur once he’d stopped squirming.

Wilbur, whose cheek was now pressed against Technoblade’s coat, scowled. “You’re a fucking prick.”

Technoblade rolled his eyes. “If you hadn’t gone and gotten yourself drunk out of your mind, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

...shit. He had a point there.

“I didn’t *mean* to drink so much,” Wilbur whined, closing his eyes when Technoblade began to walk again.

“Orpheus, I don’t know how you could accidentally drink what amounts to a full bottle of liquor,” Technoblade deadpanned, clearly not amused with his excuses.

“Okay, fine,” Wilbur relented, “I needed to drink a lot. But now I wish I hadn’t, because my head is all... all fucking... swirly and shit.”

There was another pause from Technoblade, the silence filled by his thudding footsteps echoing off the stone floors.

“Why did you need to drink?” He then asked, something careful in his tone.

Normally, a question like that would’ve set off Wilbur’s alarms. He would’ve gone into full defense mode, thinking about how to change the subject without making Technoblade suspicious. Because he didn’t want the Imperator to know why he drank so much that night. He *couldn’t* know. Because that would be showing weakness, and-

Wilbur’s train of thought grinded to a halt as a surprisingly sober thought settled over him. He didn’t want to show weakness? *Now?*

It was almost a laughable thought. Here he was, being carried in Technoblade’s arms because he was too drunk to walk, and he was worried about showing weakness. Sometimes even Wilbur had to admire his own cognitive dissonance.

That was what got him into this mess in the first place, wasn’t it? His stupid head with all of its irrational thoughts and mind-numbing paranoia. That was how he’d driven Tommy away from him. With all of his bullshit ideas about weakness and reputation.

Tommy would probably be furious if he saw Wilbur right now. Knowing that despite all of his warnings, Wilbur had gone out and done the exact type of thing he always told Tommy not to do. He was a hypocrite, plain and simple. That was why Tommy didn’t need him anymore.

Oh god. Yeah. Tommy didn’t need Wilbur anymore. That realization was what got him into this mess in the first place.

“I wanted to not think about it,” Wilbur mumbled after nearly two minutes of silence. “I needed a distraction.”

“A distraction from what?” Technoblade pushed, his voice unreadable.

A bitter laugh bubbled up from his chest. “From being sad and teary and stupid bullshit like that. But it didn’t work. I just ended up being all sad in front of Quackity which probably just made things worse.”

Oh god, there it was again. The ache. The burning behind his eyes. The *grief*.

“I miss him, Technoblade,” Wilbur whined, his voice cracking although his eyes stayed dry. “I miss him so fucking much and- and I don’t know what to do about it.”

The footsteps slowed. “...you’re talking about Tommy.”

It wasn’t a question.

“He deserves so much better than me,” Wilbur exclaimed, keeping his eyes squeezed shut.

Technoblade paused at this. He kept walking, but his steps were lighter now. Like he was trying to make it less jolting for Wilbur.

“How so?”

Wilbur tried to shrug at the question, but then remembered he was being carried, so it didn’t really work. “I’m fucking- you know, I’m not helping him. I’m pushy and mean and- and he doesn’t need that. He doesn’t need me.”

This time, the footsteps stopped entirely.

“What do *you* need though?” Technoblade asked.

And for a brief moment, that question seemed to snap him back into total sobriety. He didn’t understand what the question meant. Tommy was the one they were talking about, not him. Wilbur wasn’t the one who needed help. He wasn’t the future king struggling to make a political decision that will affect the future of their planet for generations to come. Tommy was.

“I don’t need anything,” Wilbur finally said after a few moments.

“Really?” Technoblade questioned, sounding doubtful. “Because tonight you went and got drunk out of your mind with a guy who gave you a black eye the last time you saw him. And now you’re sitting here, moaning and whining in my arms about how much you miss the brother who you literally share a bedroom with.”

He paused.

“It looks like you needed help tonight, Orpheus. But the only help you found was at the bottom of a bottle of vodka.”

There was truth ringing in his words, and both he and Wilbur knew it was there. But Wilbur didn’t want to focus on that. Because even if he wasn’t fine, he wasn’t the one who needed help. He was managing, just like he always had.

Besides, if he wanted help, his only option for that would be Tommy. His little brother who already had the weight of an entire planet on his shoulders. Wilbur had promised himself this before, but he wasn’t going to add that.

“We’re here by the way.”

Wilbur’s eyes flickered open, and he had to squint to try and make out where they were. He recognized the door to his room quickly enough, but when he tried to get down so he could go inside, he found that Technoblade wasn’t letting him go.

“I don’t trust you to not fall and crack your head open trying to get to your bed,” Technoblade huffed, readjusting Wilbur in his grip. “So open the door and I’ll drop you off.”



“I’m not a fucking child. I can walk,” Wilbur hissed, glaring at him.

Technoblade raised an eyebrow. He said nothing, but his expression was loud and clear.

*We both know that’s a lie.*

Another beat passed. Wilbur’s stubbornness could only last so long when he was drunk off his ass.

“Fuck you,” he muttered again as he twisted around, reaching to unlock the door to the bedroom.

Sliding open with a soft *hiss*, Wilbur and Technoblade were greeted with the sight of a completely dark room. Technoblade was surprisingly quiet as he made his way to the bed, where Wilbur could just make out the soft glow of his brother’s freckles as he slept.

Wilbur had hoped that he would be able to slide into bed without Tommy waking up, because the absolute last thing he needed right now was Tommy finding out he’d gotten piss drunk with Quackity. And it seemed like Technoblade didn’t want that either, given how quiet he was being as he set Wilbur down on the comforter.

But before he could take a step back from the bed, there was a sharp exhale behind Wilbur, followed by the mattress shifting.

“What the fuck?” Tommy slurred, his voice rough with sleep. “Wha’s going on?”

“Go back to sleep, kid,” Technoblade whispered. “Nothin’ to worry about.”

Of course, Technoblade’s voice had the exact opposite effect, and Tommy’s eyes opened wider.

“Techno? What the fuck are you-” His eyes then flickered to Wilbur, who was sitting on top of the blankets fully-clothed, even still wearing his shoes. “Wil? Did you just get back?”

And even though Wilbur had tried to sober up, had tried to promise himself that seeing Tommy wasn’t going to make the ache he’d been feeling all night any worse, all of those things went out the window the second he heard his little brother speak to him in a voice softer than anything he’d heard from him in weeks.

He knew that if he tried to speak, his voice would break, and then Tommy would wake up even more. But it just hurt *so badly*. The waves in his head were swelling again, and his spinning thoughts got faster and faster as he tried to figure out what to say to that.

He didn’t want to disappoint Tommy and tell him where he’d been. But he also knew that if he hid it from Tommy, he’d find out anyway, and would just be more upset that Wilbur didn’t tell him outright.

It was a lose lose situation. One that Wilbur particularly didn’t want to deal with right now.

So rather than answering, Wilbur decided that he might as well just indulge himself while he could. His shoulders slumped, and he scooted across the bed until he was sitting right next to Tommy. Then, before Tommy could ask him what he was doing, he decided to stop fighting against gravity and let himself tip forward so his face was buried in Tommy's shoulder.

"Wh- Wil? Are you okay?" Tommy asked, stiffening immediately.

Wilbur couldn't respond. It was too much right now. Too much exhaustion. Too many things he couldn't say in front of Technoblade. Too many words he wasn't ready to say to Tommy.

Keeping his mouth shut, Wilbur made a small noise to try and reassure Tommy he was alright. Then, he wrapped his arms around Tommy's shoulders, hugging him as tight as he dared in the wake of his strange outburst.

"What- Techno, did you do something to him?" Tommy asked, hesitantly wrapping his arms around Wilbur's back.

"What? No, of course not. He's just drunk," Technoblade explained.

Although Wilbur's face was buried in Tommy's shoulder, he could practically hear his little brother's frown. "Was he drinking alone?"

There was a quiet shifting sound as Technoblade (presumably) shook his head. "He was in Quackity's room. According to him, Orpheus asked to share a drink and it just spiraled from there."

Tommy stiffened. "*Quackity*? Why the fuck would he share a drink with Quackity?"

They were talking about Wilbur like he wasn't even here. Sure, he was half-passed out on Tommy's shoulder right now, but he was still here.

"Wanted to," Wilbur said, his voice muffled by Tommy's shirt.

"Why though?" Tommy pushed, tightening the hold he had around Wilbur's back.

That was too much to try and explain right now. Too much for his exhausted, spinning mind.

When he didn't respond, Tommy sighed and rested a hand on the center of his back.

"Quackity didn't do anything to him, right, Techno?"

"No, he didn't. Trust me, I thought that too, but Quackity was practically begging me to get him out."

"Fucking weird," Tommy muttered, readjusting so he was sitting up a bit more. "Uh, well, thanks for bringing him back."

"You don't need to thank me, Tommy," Technoblade huffed. "Do you need anymore help with him, or-"

"Nah, I got it," Tommy said, cutting him off.

There was a pause, and Wilbur heard more footsteps, like Technoblade was backing away from the bed.

“I’ll head out then. G’night.”

“Night Techno,” Tommy called back.

And with another soft *hiss*, Wilbur knew the door to their room had opened and closed for the last time that night, leaving him and his brother alone.

Silence wrapped around them. Heavy. Expectant. Waiting.

Wilbur didn’t want to say anything. He didn’t even think he could if he tried. His mind was far too jumbled at this point, and exhaustion was dragging down every atom in his body. Even sitting half-slumped into Tommy, he could feel himself drifting towards sleep. He couldn’t deal with any more conversations tonight.

“Okay Wil, c’mon, you can’t go to sleep like this,” Tommy said, grunting as he shoved Wilbur off of him.

Wilbur whined when Tommy’s arms moved away from him, a chill threading under his jacket at the sudden lack of contact. “But Tommyyyyy-”

“Oh shut up, you big baby,” Tommy huffed, pushing Wilbur’s reaching arms down and scooting over to grab his foot.

Even though Wilbur’s eyes had adjusted to the dark, and he probably could take his shoes off himself at this point, he didn’t argue as Tommy unlaced his boots. He muttered quiet curses under his breath, but still did it for Wilbur without a word of protest. There was a soft *thud!* as Tommy tossed the shoes against the wall, before he gestured towards Wilbur’s coat, silently telling him to take off the heavy fabric so he could sleep comfortably.

Wilbur’s fingers fumbled against the leather and metal of his coat belt, but once it was undone, he was able to toss it to the side with ease. Cold air sent a chill down his spine once he was left in trousers and a button-down shirt, and Wilbur wrapped his arms over his chest to try and keep himself warm.

“Get under the fucking blankets, you idiot,” Tommy told him, holding up the comforter.

Ducking under the blankets, the cold was chased from his limbs as warmth washed over him. He readjusted a few times to get comfortable, but soon he was laying on his own pillow, and Tommy was settled back on the pillow beside him.

The freckles on Tommy’s cheeks glowed like stars in the dark room. Wilbur wondered if his were just as bright, or if his own stars were fading like he was.

Although the cold had sobered him up a little bit, he was still in that hazy space of exhaustion and bad decision-making. Even though he was warm again, his arms still ached to hug his little brother. Tommy was only inches from him, but he was so far away at the same time. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and the chasm between them made Wilbur’s eyes burn.

“Tommy?” Wilbur whispered, his voice shattering the silence with the force of a bullet.

In the faint blue glow, Wilbur could see Tommy clench his jaw. “Yeah?”

There were so many questions Wilbur could ask. So many unknowns flying around his head, desperate for answers, desperate for something to latch onto even if it ruined him to hear.

*Why are you so far away?*

*Do you hate me now?*

*Was I not good enough?*

*Was I ever good enough?*

*Do you still care about me?*

*Do you know that I still care about you?*

The words sat on the tip of his tongue, begging to be let out into the air. But questions like that came with a risk. The risk of not hearing the answer he wanted. The risk of hearing an answer that could destroy him.

Wilbur was a coward. He was a drunken coward who couldn't tell his little brother what he was thinking, because if he put the truth into words, that would be the last piece of his foundation turning to dust. There was so little stone holding him up anymore, and he didn't know what would become of him if he broke apart.

“Can I hug you?” Wilbur asked instead, his voice so small, it sounded more like a child's than his own.

A beat. The tension in Tommy's jaw loosened just a bit.

“Yeah,” Tommy sighed, something more resigned in his words than anything Wilbur had ever heard before. “C'mere, Wil.”

Tommy's agreement wasn't a happy one. He was tired. Not just in the physical sense, but in an emotional one as well. If Wilbur was in his right state of mind, he probably wouldn't have asked in the first place. He would've backed off, and either asked Tommy if he was alright, or just told him to forget about it so he could sleep.

But Wilbur wasn't in his right state of mind. He was drunk and sad and *needed* something physical to keep him tethered to his body right now.

So he opened up his arms, and Tommy curled against him in a way that was so familiar, but so foreign at the same time. It was the same way Tommy would sleep when he needed Wilbur's comfort during the windy season. It was the same way Tommy had slept that night when he was a little kid, and made Wilbur promise to never leave him.

Yet, even now with Tommy's forehead pressed against his chest, Wilbur could still feel the distance between them. Tommy was in his arms, but he wasn't with Wilbur. Not really.

It hurt so much more than anything else that night to realize this. That no matter how close they were, the gap was still there. And if Wilbur had been a little less exhausted, he might've teared up about it.

But he was so, *so* tired. So despite the sadness threatening to drown him under its waves, Wilbur let his swirling mind take him away from the aches and pains resonating in his body. He let his eyes flutter shut, and fell asleep to the sound of Tommy's soft breaths.



It wasn't until Wilbur woke up that he realized he and Tommy never said goodnight to each other.

Waking up was a horrible affair. His eyes were sticky—practically glued shut with crust. There was a throbbing pain reverberating through his skull, and his mouth tasted like he'd swallowed three handfuls of dirt. There was a vague sense of nausea sitting in the back of his throat as well. It felt like an extra 'fuck you' from the universe. Not only was he exhausted and had a horrible headache, but the idea of eating breakfast was enough to make him gag, even though he knew from experience that it would help his hangover immensely.

Either way, Wilbur hated hangovers. And he hated himself for getting so fucked up the night before.

Actually, how fucked up *did* he get?

Wilbur came back to himself in pieces, as did his memories of the night.

His hair was tangled and lumped up under the pillow his head was resting on.

He'd asked Quackity to go have drinks with him.

His arms were wrapped around something warm and solid.

He'd spilled so many pathetic, stupid thoughts to the guy who punched him just because he was the only one around to listen.

The warm thing he was hugging was breathing softly, giving Wilbur the strangest sense of *deja vu*.

Technoblade had come to pick him up from Quackity's, and had physically carried Wilbur back to his room while he whined about how much he missed Tommy.

Tommy was still asleep in his arms.

Wilbur hadn't given his little brother any explanations, but begged him for a hug anyway.

It was a brute force effort for him to open his eyes. He winced when the eye crust tugged at his skin, and winced at the light filtering in between the curtains. He glanced down and saw that Tommy was still curled into his side, and it was so similar to the way Tommy clung to him in his sleep when he was a little kid, that it made a new wave of grief wash over him tenfold.

His breathing hitched with the sudden emotion. Tommy felt the jolt, and Wilbur's heart sank when his little brother began to shift.

There were a few seconds where Wilbur watched Tommy's features stiffen and relax again as he slowly settled into the waking world. Then, his eyes flickered open, and when blue met brown, Tommy *jolted*.

"Fucking-" Tommy flinched away from Wilbur, before coming back to his senses and relaxing again. "Shit, I forgot about last night," he muttered.

"Sorry," Wilbur said, his voice hoarse.

Tommy opened his mouth, as if to reassure Wilbur that he had nothing to apologize for. But he stopped himself before he said anything. He paused, glancing at Wilbur again, before he pulled away completely and settled himself back on his side of the bed.

"You should be," he huffed, sitting up against his pillows to drag his hands down his face. "I don't know what the fuck got into you, but drinking with Quackity wasn't a good idea."

"I know," Wilbur agreed, wincing when another stabbing pain flashed through his head. "Fuck, trust me, I'm regretting it now."

There was a moment as Tommy's gaze flickered over Wilbur, taking in his pale face and dark eyebags. His brows furrowed when Wilbur sat up, wincing again because of his headache.

"Now that you're sober, are you gonna tell me why you went to drink with him?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Wilbur shrugged. "I don't know."

It sounded like a lie. It was a lie, at least partially. But it also wasn't. Because Wilbur still wasn't sure what possessed him to ask Quackity of all people to drink with him. At the same time though, he knew that wasn't what Tommy was asking. He wanted to know what was upsetting Wilbur in the first place enough to drive him to that.

And, well, Wilbur obviously wasn't going to tell him that.

Tommy huffed out a bitter laugh. "Alright, sure, we'll go with that." He shook his head, twisting his fingers into the blankets, before he looked at Wilbur again. "Can you at least tell me why you were so... clingy?"

*Because I was sad.*

That was the simplest answer Wilbur could give him, but he knew it would only lead to more questions. Questions Wilbur wasn't able to answer.

"I was drunk," Wilbur lied, staring at his lap. "You know I get clingy when I'm drunk."

"Not like that," Tommy argued, voice growing sharp. "That wasn't you being all silly and clingy like you usually are. You were upset about something, Wilbur. I could tell."

Wilbur clenched his jaw, cheeks burning with embarrassment. "I was just drunk."

There was a long silence. It stretched between them, pulling the string that tied their hearts together so tight it was making Wilbur's rib cage scream. Anger crackled in the air. Wilbur struggled to take a deep breath.

Then,

"I don't know what else I fucking expected," Tommy snapped, the bed shifting as he climbed out and stormed to the bathroom.

While Tommy was in the bathroom, Wilbur pulled his knees up to his chest, burying his face in them as he curled back against his pillows. His head was still pounding, and he desperately needed water. But he couldn't move. He could barely even breathe.

A few minutes later, the door opened again, and Tommy pointedly didn't look at Wilbur as he made his way to the closet. Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut, massaging his temples as he listened to the shuffling sounds of Tommy getting dressed.

"I'm gonna go hang out with Ranboo," Tommy said after he'd buttoned up his coat.

Wilbur glanced up, another stab flashing through his skull at the movement. Tommy was giving him an expectant look, and for the life of him, Wilbur couldn't figure out what it meant. Was this an offer? Breaking their silence over the past few weeks to tell Wilbur where he was going again, in the hopes that maybe Wilbur would open up in turn?

Or was it a challenge? Did Tommy want Wilbur to protest him leaving so they could start something?

He didn't know. But either way, Wilbur felt too shitty to try and play mind games with his little brother right then. His patience was threadbare, and the challenge dancing in Tommy's eyes was enough to make it snap.

The anger... Wilbur had almost forgotten about it in the wake of everything else was feeling. But it was still there. Lingered under his skin, whispering in his ear every time he remembered others showing how little they thought of him. Sometimes, those on Eldingvegr would look at him with an expectation in their eyes. Wanting something from him he could never give.

Wilbur knew Tommy didn't mean it in the same way they did. But the look in his eyes was the same, and that was enough to stir the anger sitting behind his ribs.

“Hope you have fun hanging out with a spy,” Wilbur taunted, the words slipping out of his mouth without his permission.

Tommy’s eyes narrowed. “You still on about that bullshit?”

Wilbur snorted, the frustration inside of him swelling in time with the waves. “It’s not bullshit if it’s true. Go make sure to tell Ranboo all of Eldingvegr’s weak points and how to exploit them. That’ll tell you if he’s a spy or not.”

There was no reason for Wilbur to bring this argument up again. No reason except for the fact that he felt like shit, and Tommy clearly wanted something from him. The only thing Wilbur had to give right now was his anger. So if Tommy asked, that’s what he was going to get.

“What? Not gonna defend the traitorous bastard?” Wilbur pushed when Tommy didn’t say anything.

When Tommy still didn’t reply, Wilbur kept going.

“Isn’t this what you want, Tommy?” Wilbur asked, straightening up. “You want me to rant and rave like a madman so you have an excuse to get pissed at me again. That’s why you brought Ranboo up. I’m not fucking stupid.”

Wilbur hadn’t noticed till now, but Tommy had curled his hands into such tight fists at his sides, his knuckles were turning white.

“Are you saying you don’t actually think Ranboo’s a spy?”

This almost made Wilbur laugh.

“No, I’m not saying that at all. I don’t trust Ranboo as far as I can throw him, and you shouldn’t either, but you’ve never been good at listening to my advice.”

Tommy’s nostrils flared as he struggled to reign in his temper.

“I don’t need an excuse to be pissed at you, Wilbur. I just want you to stop making it so fucking easy for me,” he snapped, the words lined by a razor’s edge.

With that, Tommy turned on his heel and stormed out of the bedroom, leaving Wilbur alone with the tension still crackling in the air.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Wilbur groaned and buried his face in his hands. His anger dissipated as quickly as it had spiked, the waves settling into seafoam as they crashed along the shores. He took a shaky breath through his fingers, cursing himself for doing that. This wasn’t him. This wasn’t the person he wanted to be. But his patience was gone, and all that was left was this ugly, mean thing inside of him that didn’t trust anything or anyone.

And to top it all off, he still had a bitch of a headache that he knew wasn’t going to go away anytime soon.

*“Wilbur, my head hurts,” Niki whined, her arm thrown over her face to cover her eyes.*



*"I told you not to drink that whole bottle of blaze wine," Wilbur reminded her as he set down two pills on the nightstand beside her. "There's some painkiller by the way."*

*Throwing the arm off her face, Niki turned her head and lit up when she spotted the pills. "Thank you, Wil. You're a lifesaver," she said, wincing as she sat up to grab the pills.*

*Wilbur handed her a glass of water, and she ended up chugging the entire thing long after she'd gotten the pills down. Then, she set the glass back on the nightstand, and dragged her hands down her face.*

*"I feel like shit," she muttered, webbed fingers rubbing at the smudged makeup under her eyes. "Why am I the one who always gets the worst hangovers out of the two of us?"*

*Snorting, Wilbur sat down on the edge of her bed and shrugged. "Because I don't drink as much as you most of the time."*

*"It's because I'm a siren," Niki argued, shifting so she was leaning against Wilbur's side. "Different alcohol tolerances and all. I need more blaze wine to actually feel it."*

*"You and I both know that's bullshit," Wilbur huffed. "Sirens and humans have nearly the same alcohol tolerance. If anything, you guys are more susceptible to blaze wine since you don't have as much exposure to blaziphane as we do."*

*Niki smiled, although it made her wince again. "The others don't need to know that though."*

*"I suppose they don't," Wilbur agreed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.*

*They fell silent for a moment. Niki's eyes fluttered shut, the blankets twisted around the party dress she was still wearing from the night before. Then, she shuddered once, and Wilbur saw her grimace.*

*"Fuck, my head is killing me," she complained, turning her face towards Wilbur's shoulder to hide from the light. "I hate this so much. I feel so... out of it. And like I can't do anything."*

*"It won't last long. You just gotta take a shower and get some food in you," Wilbur reassured her.*

*"I know, I know," she sighed, eyes fluttering open again. There was another pause as she stared at the wall, fingers absently twisting into the blankets in her lap. "It's just-" her voice cracked, "it's just... you know when you feel sick, and everything just seems terrible? You feel so bad that all you want is for someone to give you a hug and tell you it's gonna be okay like you're a little kid again?"*

*Wilbur looked down at Niki. "Do you need a hug?"*

*Biting her lip, she nodded, and Wilbur didn't hesitate to wrap his arms around his best friend and pull her close.*

*For the thousandth time, Wilbur found himself wishing that Niki was here. That he could complain to her about how much his head hurt, and she could admonish him for drinking so*

much, and he could just *hug* someone.

Everything was terrible. But now it wasn't just because he felt sick. It was so much more.

He wanted to talk to someone. Not even to talk about anything specific, he just needed to complain about how shitty he felt. But he'd chased Tommy away, so he definitely wasn't going to come back to the room anytime soon. He was certain Quackity wanted nothing to do with him after the night before, which Wilbur couldn't blame him for. So that left him with only a few options.

Of course there was Jack. But considering Jack had been so against the idea of him going to Quackity's in the first place, Wilbur knew he would more likely get an, 'I told you so' than anything else.

Aimsey was a pretty solid option, but these days, they were busy with diplomatic work most of the time. And if they weren't, then that usually meant they were with Ranboo, and Ranboo was with Tommy. Therefore, probably not an option.

Technoblade... yeah, that was a good joke alright.

So that left one person. The one person who Wilbur told himself he wanted to see least of all, but knew deep down was the only person he wanted to talk to.

"I'm here to see Emperor Philza," Wilbur declared as he walked up to the throne room doors, Jack hurrying behind him.

It'd taken a herculean effort to get himself out of bed and showered, but he did it for the promise of getting rid of the crust on his eyes and the taste of death out of his mouth. He'd called in some painkillers as well, and those were helping to lessen the throbbing behind his eyes. He still felt awful overall, but at least he didn't look like a corpse.

Now he was outside the throne room doors, waiting to be let in.

"Prince Orpheus," the guard who had pinned him to the wall before said, stiffly bowing their head. "I'll let him know you're here."

Wilbur nodded back, relishing in the fact that he no longer had to ask to see Philza. There was no more groveling. No more hoping that Philza would grant him his presence. He could just... go talk to him.

There was no reason for that to be so relieving to Wilbur.

Only a minute later, the doors to the throne room were sliding open. The guards stepped aside, and Wilbur shared a single look with Jack before stepping inside.

Philza was standing by the windows, the pale light from outside casting a soft glow over his feathers. His shoulders were pushed back, and his wings were as shiny as could be. His strong, poised demeanor was the exact opposite of how Wilbur was hunched over and felt like a crumpled up piece of trash.

He should've been embarrassed by this, but he couldn't really bring himself to care about that at the moment. Both his head and his chest hurt. It was for entirely different reasons, but the two compounded onto one another, dragging him under the waves and into a pit of misery that made him want to curl up in a ball and sleep for years.

But instead he was here. He was here and so was Philza.

"Oh mate, you look like shit," was the first thing Philza said when his eyes landed on Wilbur. "Guess Techno wasn't exaggerating when he said you got really fucked up."

Yeah, he wasn't even surprised to hear at this point that Technoblade had told Philza all about the night before.

"I feel worse than I look," Wilbur complained, stopping his steps right when he was almost shoulder to shoulder with the Emperor.

"I'm sure you do," Philza muttered, eyes lingering on Wilbur's face. He paused then, glancing between Wilbur and the throne. "C'mere."

Without needing to be told twice, Wilbur followed Philza over to the steps by the throne. They sat down on them in a way that reminded Wilbur of the talk they had the day after Quackity punched him. When Wilbur had been far more open than he usually was, and learned more about Philza than he ever expected to know.

As soon as they were sitting, Wilbur's sore legs screamed with relief. He hunched over, twisting his fingers in his hair and squeezing his eyes shut when another wave of pain rushed through his head.

"Are you alright?" Philza asked, his voice lower now.

Wilbur nodded. "Just hungover."

Philza made a noise of understanding. "Techno told me you drank quite a bit. I'll admit, I was surprised. I didn't think your go to drinking buddy after Schlatt would be Quackity."

"I guess I'm trying to keep you on your toes," Wilbur joked, although it was half-hearted. "Don't think it was really worth it though. I don't know what the fuck is in Nonan gin, but I'm never drinking that shit again."

"To be honest, you should be wary of any liquor you get from Quackity. Unless he has a special occasion coming up, he'll take a good deal on items even if the quality is worse."

Wilbur huffed. "I just wanted to get drunk. I didn't care about the quality."

Philza hummed at this, and Wilbur heard a rustling sound. He glanced up and saw Philza's wing had curled around him, and got that same, strange feeling of being shielded once again.

"Orpheus," Philza began, his tone not kind, but not unkind either, "you know what I'm going to ask."

Yeah, he did know. And he'd already thought about what he was going to say.

"Why should I tell you why I went to drink with Quackity?" Wilbur challenged, surprised at the power in his voice given how exhausted he was. "What right do you have to know?"

Philza raised an eyebrow. "Do you have another subject you want to talk about? Because you came to *me*, Orpheus. You clearly want to talk about something, but if it's not that, then I'm not sure what it is."

Shit.

Taking a breath to try and steady himself, Wilbur winced again at the pain, and the ache in his chest grew stronger. It felt so stupid the more he thought about it. He went to Philza because he wanted to complain that he felt sick? What was *wrong* with him?

"Fine." Wilbur clenched his jaw, and moved to push to his feet. "I have nothing to talk about, so I should be go-"

"Don't leave," Philza cut in, a hand landing on his shoulder to keep him from standing. "You came here for a reason. What is it?"

Eyes like chips of ice pierced straight through him. A frigid chill ran down his spine, and Wilbur curled in on himself, his pounding skull and the swelling waves deep inside making it impossible to think straight.

Frustration, anger, sadness, pain—all of it was swirling together inside of him. His grief over Tommy was drowning him. The base of his pillar was almost gone, and the only thing Wilbur could see through the fog that had settled over the water was ice in the distance.

Why did he go to Philza?

"There was nowhere else for me to go," Wilbur confessed, shame settling like a blanket over his shoulder. "I just- I needed to get out of my own head. I couldn't just sit alone in my room and think over and over about how badly I fucked up or how pathetic I am."

A beat passed.

"Techno told me some of the things you said last night," Philza then said, his voice much softer now. "That you said Theseus deserves better than you."

This time, Wilbur didn't wince because of the pain in his head.

"He does."

Philza considered this for a moment. The seconds ticked on, and Wilbur could feel each moment passing like he was counting the individual grains from an hourglass himself.

"Orpheus, where is your anger?"

That-

That wasn't what Wilbur had been expecting.

"What?"

"I told you to use your anger, to remind you that you're worth more than what others think. So where's that anger gone?"

Wilbur clenched his jaw. "It's there but- this isn't what others think of me. It's what I know to be true about myself. I'm not a good person, and I'm not what Tommy needs me to be. He doesn't need me at all anymore."

"And if you were different, you think he'd still need you?"

Slowly, Wilbur nodded.

"Then let me ask you something," Philza said, tapping his talons against the stone stairs they were sitting on. "What do you think an Emperor needs to be?"

...what?

Dropping his hands from his head, Wilbur frowned at Philza. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you clearly know what an advisor needs to be. And I'm sure you could say what a King or Queen needs to be if I asked," Philza pointed out. "So I'm asking what you think an Emperor needs to be."

While Wilbur wasn't sure where Philza was going with this, he furrowed his brows and took a moment to think it over. A part of him wondered if this was a test. But Philza wasn't the type to want his ego boosted by Wilbur just listing all the traits he had. That would likely piss him off more than anything else. Not to mention, Wilbur had no desire to give Philza that kind of ego boost anyway. He'd lost his capacity for bullshit flattery months ago.

No, Philza wanted a genuine answer.

"I think an Emperor needs to be... well, first off, they need to be well-versed in intergalactic politics. If you're controlling multiple planets, you need to be able to know what kinds of governments they all run, and how they can cooperate with each other. They also need to have been taught war strategy, so that they can make effective decisions regarding their military, especially when it comes to adding new planets to the Empire." He paused, tapping his chin. "They also need to be disciplined. And have good control of their emotions. When you're at the head of not just one, but multiple planets, you can't lose your temper at the drop of a hat."

Philza nodded at this. "So you're saying an Emperor needs to be educated, disciplined, and have plenty of self-control?"

Wilbur shrugged. "That's just off the top of my head, but yes."

"Now what if I told you about a miner. He'd had little formal education, his parents having preferred to teach him what they knew but not bothering to go far beyond that. He'd never

stayed on a single planet for more than a few years, because he was always trying to find work but struggled to stay in one place without feeling suffocated. And not to mention, his impulse control was... poor. He'd gotten fired from plenty of jobs for cursing out the boss. His newest job was on a mining colony located on one of the most desolate planets in the galaxy. The kind of place they sent laborers who had no purpose being anywhere else. Would you say that man was suited to be an Emperor?"

Instead of responding, Wilbur just stared at Philza. Because... that couldn't be true, could it?

When Wilbur didn't say anything, Philza rolled his shoulders back, and his feathers ruffled in turn.

"I've told you about my childhood, but I never told you how I became the person I am today. Unlike you, I was born with no titles. I had very little education, and I was completely unfamiliar with things like intergalactic politics and war strategy and the like. All of that was stuff I'd never had a need to know. I was just a man looking for work, nothing more."

He took a deep breath.

"Zephys IV used to be known as Zephyrus 436—named after Zephyrus, a drilling company that would purchase uninhabitable planets to mine them for resources. I got a job on the mining colony they had here. The pay wasn't great, but they provided room and board for the miners. I just needed food and a roof over my head, and I didn't have the skillset for much else, so I figured why the fuck not."

Then, Philza snorted. "I quickly learned why no one wanted the damn job. The work itself was pretty backbreaking and exhausting, and the food was shit, but that was all stuff I expected. What I didn't realize was that Zephyrus was a shit company that didn't give a damn whether its employees lived or died, as long as they made a profit," he continued, lifting his hands again. "We lived in these tiny ass barracks down here in the tunnels, and while they had heaters for us, they broke so fucking often it wasn't uncommon for workers to lose fingers to frostbite. Also, whenever the food froze, we'd have to go on rations until they could send another shipment over, but we were still expected to have the same output of work. Doing intense manual labor for ten hours a day is already hard enough when you're well-fed, but when the only thing you've had to eat that day was a fucking protein bar? Yeah, that doesn't do shit for you."

Wilbur frowned. "That's horrible."

"Yup, it was. And the worst part was once you signed the contract, they wouldn't let you leave the planet till your time was up. I'd signed myself up for a two year contract, but the longer you signed up for, the bigger your starting bonus was. So poor fuckers who'd needed that extra money fast would sign up for five, sometimes even ten years. And then they were stuck on the planet until it ended." He scoffed, shaking his head. "I'd worked for plenty of shitty companies before Zephyrus, but I'd never encountered a group who cared so little about people's lives. I'd never cared much for authority either, so suffice to say, it didn't take long for me to snap and, uh, attack one of the supervisors."

"You *what*?" Wilbur asked, eyes wide.

“We had these supervisors roaming around, making sure we were all making quota and all that bullshit. This one guy was a real piece of shit—would get on your ass for low quota even if you were injured. Also, even though this definitely shouldn’t have been legal, through a bunch of legal loopholes Zephyrus was able to sign anyone fourteen years or older onto a contract, so we had a few kids in the group too. And basically, one time this guy was yelling at this kid because she kept dropping something. She couldn’t feel her fingers because it was so cold, but he didn’t give a shit. Eventually, she broke down crying, and I just lost my shit on him.”

Wilbur blinked. “What happened after that?”

Philza huffed. “Got sent to the fucking Nether, that’s what.”

“Isn’t that where Technoblade’s from?” Wilbur asked.

“Yeah, but it was also being used as a prison planet by several intergalactic organizations not associated with a single planet. They’d struck a deal with the piglins a while back—paying them to use part of their planet as a prison for anyone who broke intergalactic law. I’d broken my contract by attacking a Zephyrus employee, so they shipped me out there.” His eyes glazed over, like he was seeing the Nether in his head instead of the throne room around them. “The Nether is not a kind planet to anyone that’s not native. It’s a hellish place for those not built to withstand it, but sometimes even those that could withstand it found themselves in trouble there. Even though they were paying the piglins to use their land for the prison, there were still tensions between them and the prison staff. A lot of the piglins didn’t want the prison there anymore, but they weren’t going to just up and leave, so fights started breaking out. Which is how I ended up with a piglin for my cellmate.”

“Wait, you met Technoblade in prison?” Wilbur asked, trying not to gape.

“Pretty much,” Philza chuckled. “I didn’t know shit about the Nether, so I showed up to this planet that was half on fucking fire, and I found myself rooming with a piglin who could probably kill me with a single punch if he felt like it. But Techno... we just clicked, y’know? We understood each other. The prison was really fucking awful, but we had each other, and that helped keep us both sane. And after I hit my one year anniversary in that prison, Techno and I both thought, ‘y’know what, fuck this place.’ So we organized a breakout.”

Alright, at this point Wilbur’s head was practically spinning.

“You- You just organized a breakout like that?”

Philza rolled his eyes. “Well, I’m giving you an abridged version. But yeah, we talked to other prisoners, a lot of whom had been in contracts similar to mine. They were all pretty pissed, so it wasn’t hard to convince them to start a riot. To make a long story short, Techno and I had a plan. I was gonna go back to Zephyrus 436 and get the miners to riot like we did on the Nether, and he would show up a bit after once he got things settled with the piglins and the remaining prisoners to help out. So that’s what I did. After getting off the Nether and onto a trade planet, I snuck onto a supply ship heading back to Zephyrus 436. I managed to get back my crew, told them my plan, and we started our riot. Of course, it wasn’t as easy as I’m

making it sound, and we would've lost if Techno and a bunch of other piglins and prisoners from the Nether hadn't showed up, but that's the gist of it."

"And from there you just... were an Emperor?"

"It was a learning curve, and not as simple as just declaring myself that," Philza explained. "Once we'd chased the Zephyrus shitheads out, most of the miners on Zephys IV were fine with me taking up the leadership role. So with myself and Techno working as a unit, we already had both Zephys IV and the Nether under our control. And from there, we started to grow our Empire."

As he finished talking, his wings slumped against the floor again. He let out a breath, and pushed his hair back from his face, readjusting his metal circlet on his head before turning to meet Wilbur's eyes.

"I was not born to be an Emperor," Philza told him. "No one would've looked at me and thought that I was what an Empire needed. But here I am. So when you say you're not what Theseus needs, you need to consider that maybe you don't *know* what he needs."

Wilbur's throat was closing up, and he shook his head, trying not to meet Philza's eyes. "But--"

"I was able to create an Empire out of nothing," Philza cut him off. "You have the ability to do so much more than you think you can. But you're never going to get anywhere if you keep throwing yourself fucking pity parties every time you get frustrated."

And there it was. The spark again. The swelling waves.

"I'm not throwing myself a fucking pity party," Wilbur said, his voice low.

Slowly, Philza rose to his feet, and raised a single eyebrow at him.

"Really? Because it sure looks like that to me."

The waves grew, and Wilbur rose up as well.

"I'm not, because I don't *need* pity!" Wilbur snapped.

"But I thought you were pathetic, Orpheus. Pathetic men throw themselves pity parties."

It was a challenge. A taunt based on what he'd said before. And Wilbur was tired of backing down.

"Are you saying I'm not pathetic then?" He asked, meeting Philza's gaze without flinching.

"I never called you that. You called yourself that," Philza pointed out.

That made Wilbur grit his teeth. Was that true? Had it always been his own voice in the back of his head, telling him he was pathetic before anyone else ever could?



“Fine, then what if that’s the truth? What if I am throwing myself a fucking pity party and I am a pathetic piece of shit, huh? What then, Philza?” Wilbur shot back, shouting now. “You keep saying I’m just like you, but what if I’m not? What if this is just who I am?!”

Another silence stretched between them. Philza met Wilbur’s eyes, his expression unreadable as he took a step towards him.

“Then that’s just who you are. That’s all you ever will be. There’s no changing the person you are and there’s no making room for yourself in a new role. Is that what you want me to say, little bird?”

And that-

That wasn’t what Wilbur wanted to hear.

“No,” he gasped, shaking his head. “That’s- That’s not what I want.”

That wasn’t what he wanted, but he didn’t know how to change. His role had been chosen for him since he was a toddler, and he had no idea how to step off the path fate had built for him. He didn’t recognize the face that looked back at him from the mirror, but he didn’t know how to find himself in it again.

But Philza had stepped off the path. Philza had forged an Empire from a mining colony, and made himself into its Emperor.

The anger was still there, simmering under his skin. He let himself rise and fall with the waves in his mind, and he took a deep breath to let it settle inside of him.

Then, Philza smiled at him.

## Chapter End Notes

we are building up to something alright :) next chapter is going to be a fun time

man I've been wanting to reveal the zephyrs iv backstory for SO long now, and while I tried my best not to have too much info dumping, there was just a lot of info I had to get out in that conversation. but we know how the AE formed now! fuck corporations!

anyway I hope you guys enjoyed! I'm really excited to write the next chapter so hopefully I can get it out soon, but no promises lol. I'm technically kind of working now, so I might not have as much time to write but I get to choose my own hours for the most part so it should be fine? idk we'll see how this goes

please leave a comment telling me your thoughts. they seriously make my day :D

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

spotify playlist for this fic can be found [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# when the pillar finally breaks

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur learns something disturbing, and everything begins to unravel.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone I bet you didn't expect to see me again so soon!

so I basically just got really excited and ended up writing this chapter immediately after I posted the last one. it has a scene in it that I've had planned for 5 months now, so finally getting to write it was insanely satisfying to me. I'm sorry in advance lmao

also a note! I didn't mention this last chapter since ranboo didn't make an appearance in it, but I'm aware that ranboo has recently come out as nonbinary and uses he/they pronouns! however, since I started this fic before they came out, I've been using only he/him for ranboo. for consistencies sake, whenever I write someone who uses multiple pronouns, I tend to just choose one set to use for the story and stick with it. therefore I'm just going to keep using he/him for ranboo throughout this fic. I just wanna let you guys know I'm not purposefully ignoring the fact that he uses he/they now or anything

ok that's all for now! hope you guys enjoy this chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The library was no longer Wilbur's place of refuge, but he kept going there anyway.

He told himself it was out of spite. Just because Technoblade now seemed to always be in the library every time Wilbur wanted to go there didn't mean he was going to avoid it. He didn't want to give Technoblade that satisfaction. To let him know that his presence bothered Wilbur that much.

But the truth was that Wilbur actually didn't mind spending time in the library with Technoblade. Not like he used to, anyway. Ever since that night when Technoblade carried him back from Quackity's when he was drunk off his ass, the two had found a sort of strenuous truce with each other. It wasn't as if they were friends or anything. Not like Technoblade and Tommy. But the tension that used to choke the air between them whenever they found themselves alone together was quickly fading.

Not friends. But not enemies either.

Wilbur could make peace with neutrality.

Which was how he found himself in the library one afternoon, comfortably reading a book on his lap while Technoblade sat a few chairs away from him, doing the same. The two were silent as they read, each one content to focus on their own pages. Before, Wilbur wouldn't have been able to concentrate on the words in front of him with Technoblade in the room. But now something had shifted, and Wilbur had learned how to do just that.

His eyes skimmed over the page of facts about Floslium's government. This book was one he had picked up at random. While he would've liked to learn more about Zephyr IV's history now that he'd been about the Antarctic Empire's humble beginnings, he also understood why there were no history books on the subject yet. It was far too new. So until a book was written, his only source of information on the planet was going to be from Philza himself.

For the time being though, he could keep himself busy reading about Floslium. Except right when he was about to swipe to the next page to read about the first Forest War-

"Y'know, we can't keep doing this forever."

Technoblade's gruff voice sliced through the silence with a jolt, sending an electric current down Wilbur's spine.

"What?" He asked, glancing up from the holo-pad.

The Emperor, who had set his own holo-pad off to the side now, folded his hands in front of him and shrugged. "Phil won't tell you this, but we don't want to let Essempe get its claws too deeply embedded in Eldingvegr. It's been months now, and sooner or later, we're gonna have to make our move on the planet."

And just like that, the strange peace Wilbur had found with Technoblade shattered to the ground.

"Why wouldn't Philza tell me that?" Wilbur asked, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Because he's worried about pushing you too fast," Technoblade explained, folding his hands in front of him. "But Orpheus, I think you need to know that we're not going to sit back forever."

It was like a bucket of ice water had been dumped on his head. Wilbur clenched his teeth, jaw aching as he struggled to control his face. Fuck. *Fuck*. Of course they weren't going to wait forever. He knew that. But with everything else going on—both with Tommy and with the torrential emotions playing out a war inside of him—Wilbur had let it fall to the back of his mind. Not the situation. He could never forget about their situation. But the immediacy of it all.

He'd let his guard down, ever so briefly. And now he'd just been slapped in the face for it.

"Philza is the one who decided to postpone the negotiations. Not us," Wilbur pointed out. "If he wants to go back into it, we certainly can. We're just waiting on him."

Technoblade huffed, shaking his head. “Kinda interestin’ that you say ‘we’. When was the last time you talked to Tommy about any of this stuff?”

Wilbur had to fight not to flinch. “We’ve been busy with other things, but we still talk about it.”

They don’t talk about it. They don’t talk about much of anything these days.

“You’re lying,” Technoblade said, his voice flat.

“I’m not,” Wilbur shot back, his heart leaping into his throat.

“You are, and I know you are because if you weren’t, Tommy would’ve told you that he and I started talking about the negotiations again.”

The words were casual. An acquaintance sharing some news. Nothing sinister sat behind Technoblade’s voice—there was no malice or taunting. It was a simple fact, and nothing more.

And yet, those words were like a guillotine, falling right into the center of Wilbur’s skull.

”*What?*”

“It wasn’t a formal meeting or anything. But we talked a bit about it, and where things might go,” Technoblade told him, feigning obliviousness to the turmoil Wilbur was going through.

Tommy talked to Technoblade about the negotiations. Tommy talked *politics* with the Imperator.

And he hadn’t told Wilbur. Hadn’t mentioned a single thing about it to him.

“Wh- What did- did he-”

“Nothing’s been solidified yet, but we discussed possible terms for Eldingvegr to join the Antarctic Empire, since Tommy seems to be in favor of that now.”

No. No no no no- that can’t be true. Tommy wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t give up like that. Especially not without saying a word of it to Wilbur first. He *wouldn’t*.

“Why are you telling me this?” Wilbur demanded, jumping to his feet.

Technoblade raised a single pink eyebrow at him, his golden eyes unreadable behind his glasses. “Because you and Tommy aren’t talking anymore, and it’s causin’ problems for the rest of us. Whether you like it or not, we gotta move forward with things, and I’m tired of waiting for you and Phil to finish your whole song and dance.”

“You’re lying,” Wilbur spat, panic clawing the back of his throat.

“If you think I’m lying, go ask Tommy about it. See if he tells you the truth,” Technoblade said, leaning back in his seat.

Wilbur stood there, feet frozen to the floor as ice crawled up his spine. Technoblade could be lying. He might just be trying to start an argument between them. But why would he do that? Wilbur had already drunkenly whined about how bad things were between him and his brother to Technoblade already, so he knew they weren't on good terms. Why would he feel a need to split them up further?

But at the same time, Wilbur didn't want to even consider the idea that he could be telling the truth. Because if he was, that meant that his fears weren't just the result of his paranoid mind. It meant that Tommy really didn't trust him anymore. Didn't look to him for guidance. Didn't *need* him.

Philza had told him that maybe Wilbur just didn't know what Tommy needed. That maybe Wilbur was already enough. Or that he at least had the potential to be.

If what Technoblade said was true though, that meant Tommy had given up on him.

The ice continued to creep its way up his spine and around his chest. It covered his ribs and swallowed his heart, sending stabbing pains through his entire body. He couldn't move, and he couldn't breathe. His worst nightmare was coming true.

"Orpheus?" Technoblade asked after a moment, when Wilbur hadn't made a move to leave. "You, uh... you okay?"

There was concern in his voice. The flat, empty tone from before was gone. Now Technoblade's concern laced itself around his words, thawing some of the ice that was piercing through the fatty tissue and muscles of his heart.

He took a ragged breath, and felt more of the ice crack around his lungs.

"I- I'm fine," he lied, his voice trembling as he stumbled back. "I need to go."

Immediately, Technoblade frowned and pushed to his feet. "Orpheus-"

Before he could say anything else though, Wilbur broke the frost encasing his limbs, and turned on his heel to hurry out of the library. He ignored Technoblade calling his name behind him, because he couldn't handle speaking to him right now. Not after what he just told Wilbur.

Jack jumped when Wilbur practically burst from the library, brows furrowing as he took in Wilbur's wide eyes and heavy breathing.

"Wil? What's wrong?" Jack asked, rushing to his side.

"I can't- I can't tell you," Wilbur gasped, fighting to fill his lungs. "I just- shit, I can't fucking do this."

He wasn't making sense, but he couldn't explain what was going on to Jack. He just *couldn't*. Even if he trusted Jack, he wasn't sure if he could get his mouth to form the words right now.

Somehow, Jack understood this without Wilbur needing to tell him.

“Outside?” He asked after a beat, squaring his shoulders like he was preparing for battle.

The thing was, Wilbur needed to talk to Tommy. He needed to find out where he was and speak to him as soon as possible. But at the same time, he wasn’t even sure if he’d be able to make it to their room without passing out from hyperventilating.

He needed everything to shut off, for just a moment. He had to quiet his head enough so he could hear his own thoughts over the roaring waves.

“Please,” he gasped out.

That was all he had to say. Without a second of hesitation, Jack grabbed his wrist and started guiding him down the hall and towards the staircase. Wilbur’s breaths were stuttered, but he tried to focus on the warm fingers wrapped around his arm, and not the deafening roar echoing in his ears.

Before they could even get to the stairs though, Wilbur found himself running directly into the last person he wanted to see.

“Oh! Orpheus, I’m sorry, I didn’t-” Ranboo cut himself off when he noticed Jack grabbing his wrist, before his eyes then flickered back to Wilbur’s face. “Wait, are you okay?”

Yes, he wanted to snap. *Leave me be.*

Except the panic wrapping itself around Wilbur’s throat and cutting off his air disappeared the moment he locked onto Ranboo’s two-toned face. Because Ranboo was Tommy’s closest confidant these days. He’d practically told Wilbur as much himself. And Ranboo was Technoblade’s protege.

If anyone knew what was going on with Tommy, it would be the enderian standing right in front of him.

“Did you know?” Wilbur demanded, taking a step towards Ranboo.

Ranboo blinked, clearly confused. “Uh, did I know what?”

“Oh, don’t play fucking dumb with me, Ranboo,” Wilbur snarled, curling his hands into fists. “Did you know that Tommy and Technoblade were talking about Eldingvegr joining the Empire?”

Behind him, Wilbur heard Jack mutter an, *“oh fuck.”*

Meanwhile, Ranboo’s eyes widened.

“N-No! I didn’t even know he and Techno had opened up the negotiations again!” Ranboo stammered, holding his arms close to his chest.

Wilbur frowned. His gut wasn’t reliable anymore. He knew that. But still, there was something deep inside of him telling him that Ranboo was lying to him. That despite the waver in his voice and the genuine concern in his eyes, he was a *liar*.

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Wilbur snapped. “You’re Techno’s protege, and one of Tommy’s closest friends. There’s no way you didn’t hear something from either one of them.”

Ranboo shook his head, his black and white hair falling over his face. “They don’t- We don’t talk about that stuff most of the time!”

“Oh really? You don’t? Not even when Tommy is pissed at me? He doesn’t rant and rave about how fucked up our whole situation is?”

There was a beat as Ranboo shrunk back, gaze dropping to the floor. He curled in on himself, and a rock dropped into the pit of Wilbur’s stomach.

“I’m onto you, Ranboo,” Wilbur hissed, narrowing his eyes. “You’re always sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, and I know why that is. You might have Tommy fooled, but I’m not an idiot.”

“Orpheus, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just- Tommy’s my friend! And I thought-” He cut himself off, slamming his mouth shut like he was worried he’d said too much.

Wilbur took another step closer to him. “And you thought what, Ranboo?”

Letting out a shaky breath, Ranboo dropped his arms from his chest.

“I thought we could be friends too, Orpheus. I get worried about you just like I get worried about Tommy.”

For a moment, Wilbur’s chest seized at that. Because despite being horrible to Ranboo ever since he got here, now he was telling Wilbur that all he wanted was to be his friend. That for some godforsaken reason, Ranboo gave a shit about Wilbur when Wilbur had never given a shit about him.

But then the seizing stopped. Wilbur took a deep breath, and flashed Ranboo the coldest look he could muster.

“That’s how I know you’re a liar. Because we were never anything close to friends.”

Ranboo flinched, and something like guilt flashed through Wilbur like a burn. But before he could actually think about the fact that he felt guilty for saying that to Ranboo, there was another voice echoing in the corridor.

“Wilbur!”

Wilbur jolted at the foreign anger in Aimsey’s voice as they stormed down the hall, their face twisted into a scowl and the flowers on their cheeks bristling. Ranboo immediately stepped back so he was closer to them, and they moved in front of him, acting like a shield despite barely being half his height.

“Aimsey, this isn’t your fight,” Wilbur warned them.



“Actually, this is my fight, Wilbur. When one of my friends decides to be a dick to my other friend for no good reason, that makes it my fight,” they snapped, narrowing their eyes at him. “Ever since you got here, you’ve been nothing but rude to Ranboo. Why is that?”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur met Aimsey’s dark gaze and tried not to flinch. “Because I don’t trust him or his intentions with befriending Tommy.”

Aimsey considered this for a moment, although their frown didn’t lessen. “Did he do anything to earn this distrust?”

“Aimsey, you’re not a fucking therapist so please stop-”

“I asked a question, Wilbur. Did Ranboo do anything to earn your distrust?”

Heart pounding, Wilbur fought to take a measured breath through his nose. “No. But he didn’t do anything to earn my trust either.”

At this, something in Aimsey’s face softened. “But did you ever give him a chance to?”

Wilbur could tell what Aimsey was trying to do. They had always been the one to resolve fights among others. They were a peacekeeper. They hated fighting, and always encouraged those involved to talk things out and figure out where the root of the problem was.

Except right now, Wilbur knew the root of his problem. And it wasn’t anything a simple conversation could fix.

“I can’t afford to give chances like that. Because the last time I trusted someone, they tried to have me *killed!*”

Aimsey flinched at Wilbur’s shout, as did Ranboo who was still cowering behind them.

A beat of silence passed. Wilbur’s pounding heart only grew louder in his ears, and the icy panic began to wrap around his limbs once again.

“Wil,” Aimsey said after a moment, their voice much gentler than before. “I get that you were betrayed once, and it was really fucking awful. But you have to trust people again eventually. Just because one person took advantage of that doesn’t mean everyone else will.”

Saltwater was filling his lungs as he fought to breathe.

“You’re wrong,” he choked out. “Everyone will fuck you over eventually. Even your own brother.”

Then, before Aimsey could ask what he meant, Wilbur was storming down the hallway with Jack right at his heels. His head was spinning and the waves were drowning him now, so he grabbed Jack’s wrist and gave him a silent, pleading look.

*Get me out of here.*

Without needing to be told this time, Jack began to lead Wilbur down the hall and back to the staircase they were originally going towards. Wilbur barely registered the sound of his own steps, so caught up in his own thoughts of Tommy and Ranboo and Aimsey and how this was all wrong. This wasn't how things were supposed to be.

Up the stairs, down the hall, and into the small room—Jack led Wilbur up the spiral staircase leading to the trapdoor without a single word passing between them. Wilbur followed, fighting to catch his breath until the trapdoor opened, and he was blasted in the face with frigid air.

Goosebumps rose along his arms as he climbed out onto the landing, the icy wind cutting straight through his frenzied thoughts and forcing him out of his own head for just a moment. Jack shut the trapdoor behind them, and as soon as it was closed, Wilbur fell to his knees and twisted his fingers into his hair.

*"Fuck!"* He shouted, his voice instantly carried away by the howling wind.

He felt more than heard Jack kneel down behind him.

"Just breathe, mate. You look like you're gonna fucking pass out."

Wilbur fought to take him a full breath, the icy air stabbing into his lungs. The pain yanked him out of his head for just a moment, and he sucked in another gulp of air, wincing at how it felt like swallowing knives.

Tommy betrayed him. The realization settled in his gut like a rock. His own brother, the boy he had practically raised since he was a toddler, had gone behind his back to continue the negotiations without him.

What had been the final straw? Was it recent, with Wilbur refusing to tell Tommy why he'd gone and gotten drunk with Quackity? Or was it something further back? Ranboo had told Wilbur that Tommy thought he didn't trust him anymore, and Wilbur hadn't done anything to fix that. Because it had been true. Wilbur stopped trusting Tommy at some point, and he knew he didn't have it in him to lie to his little brother's face about it. So he'd just avoided it, hoping things would even out with time. Maybe that was where his mistake had been.

Or maybe... maybe this had always been an inevitability. Maybe this path was laid out for the both of them the second they set foot on this planet. That the two would be pulled apart, until they were little more than familiar faces to each other.

Maybe Wilbur had always been destined to fail.

Suddenly, Philza's voice echoed in his head.

*"Then that's just who you are. That's all you ever will be. There's no changing the person you are and there's no making room for yourself in a new role. Is that what you want me to say, little bird?"*

That's not what Wilbur had wanted to hear. He wanted to change. He wanted to be something more than the role that was given to him.

So maybe thinking that he was destined to fail was stupid, because the idea of destiny itself was bullshit. But whether or not this was inevitable, that didn't change the fact that this was his reality now. Tommy was considering joining the Empire. The battle Wilbur had been fighting against this entire time was almost lost.

"Wil?" Jack said after a few minutes of silence, his voice barely audible above the winds. "You feeling a bit better?"

"I don't know," Wilbur admitted, not even having noticed that he'd slumped against the wall at some point. "There's just- there's so much going on in my head right now. It's hard to think straight."

Jack nodded, furrowing his brows. "Yeah, uh, I'm sure you're a little freaked out right now." He paused, sitting back against the wall. "You don't have to tell me shit if you don't want to, but if you wanna talk about your thoughts or whatever it might just... help to have a sounding board or something."

The small voice in the back of Wilbur's head kept screaming at him not to trust anyone. Not Tommy, not Ranboo, not Jack. But at the same time, what was the fucking point anymore? Tommy was already considering joining the Empire. That ship had already set sail. Even if Jack was a snitch, which Wilbur at this point was almost certain he wasn't, what would he tell Puffy that could make things worse?

"You heard me tell Ranboo that Tommy was talking to Technoblade about Eldingvegr joining the Empire," Wilbur began, keeping his eyes on the frost covered stone he was sitting on.

"Yeah, I did," Jack confirmed.

Swallowing down a lump in his throat, Wilbur nodded. "Yeah, well, that's just fucking it, isn't it? This whole time I've been trying to keep us from having to join the Empire, and then Tommy goes and talks to the fucking Imperator himself about joining without even telling me he was going to do it. Which just proves to me that he doesn't give a damn about my opinion anymore."

"Well... did he and Technoblade make any actual decisions about the whole joining thing?" Jack asked.

Wilbur shrugged. "No, nothing formal. But they talked about it, and that's practically a gavel slam right there. Technoblade knows that Tommy is willing to join now, and that tells him and Philza they just have to keep pushing and he'll agree soon enough. We were already at a huge disadvantage, but Tommy's basically handed them our fucking surrender on a silver platter."

A moment passed as Jack considered this.

“I mean, I know I’m just a guard and I don’t really get all this politics shit like you do, but I don’t think this is as cut and dry as you think it is,” Jack said, his mismatched eyes focused on the glittering city below. “No decisions have been made yet. Yeah, it’s not great for negotiations, but I wouldn’t say things are over until you actually sign the papers.”

When another breeze blew over them, a chill ran down Wilbur’s spine.

“Tommy didn’t tell me about it, Jack. Didn’t even say he was considering bringing it up to Technoblade. He could’ve signed those fucking papers without me knowing a goddamn thing. The only reason I found out was because Technoblade told me, not him.”

“It sounds like your problem isn’t so much with the whole bit about Eldingvegr joining the Empire, but more about the fact that Theseus isn’t telling you stuff,” Jack pointed out. “And if that’s what’s got you so fucked up, then you should probably try talking to him about it.”

Wilbur scoffed. “Wow, no fucking shit.”

Another beat passed as Jack frowned at him. Shame washed over Wilbur like the wind freezing his blood, and it was only a few seconds before he let out a breath.

“I’m sorry, that was uncalled for,” he muttered, pulling his knees close to his chest. “I just- this is really fucking me up.”

Jack’s frown faded almost as quickly as it appeared. “It’s okay. I get it. I’d be pretty fucking pissed too if I were in your shoes.”

And that made something snap inside Wilbur’s head.

*Pissed.* The hurt and grief swirling around the waves were not the source of his spinning thoughts. No, the thing that was causing the waves to swell in the first place was, once again, his anger.

Wilbur had been dismissed and ignored his entire life. By the servants on Eldingvegr, by the ambassadors from Themis, and even by the Essempi soldiers.

*“I don’t like letting bugs fly around my head. It’s just distracting.”*

Now Tommy had dismissed him. Had deemed it unimportant to tell him this major development in their negotiations. His own brother couldn’t tell him upfront what he was thinking.

Philza had told Wilbur that he was the one who called himself pathetic. And right now, Wilbur knew he was being pathetic again. He was hiding on the roof of the palace instead of confronting his little brother.

He didn’t want to be pathetic enough to be dismissed anymore.

“I need to talk to him,” Wilbur said suddenly, pushing to his feet and opening the trapdoor again.

Jack's eyes widened. "Uh, you want me to take you back to your room?"

Wilbur nodded, the waves roaring in his ears louder than the wind howling around his head. "Yes. Take me back."

By some miracle or another, they didn't run into anyone else on the walk back. When Wilbur opened the door, his fists were clenched and he was expecting to find himself face to face with Tommy, but instead was met with an empty room.

"According to Puffy, he's in the training room," Jack told him after relaying a message into his earpiece.

"Alright. I'll wait here until he gets back."

Nodding, Jack stepped back out of the doorway. "I'll be out here if you need anything."

With that, the door slid shut, and Wilbur found himself alone for the first time all day.

His mind was racing. Anger thawed away the ice in his blood, and he paced around the room, finding himself unable to stay still. He had to wait. Wait for his brother to get back, and look into his eyes knowing that he had betrayed him.

A few months ago, Wilbur wouldn't have been able to fathom the idea of Tommy betraying him like this. But then again, a few months ago his little brother wasn't a stranger to him. He was someone Wilbur knew better than he knew himself, and everything about him made sense.

*"Wilbaaaaa!" Tommy whined as he entered the sitting room. "Where are you?"*

*"I'm over here, child," Wilbur called back, lifting a hand behind the back of the couch so Tommy could see him.*

*There was a brief pause. Then, footsteps were running towards him, and Wilbur didn't even get a chance to brace himself before Tommy was collapsing on top of the couch—and on top of Wilbur in turn.*

*"Fuck!" Wilbur yelped as the full weight of a fifteen year old boy was dropped on top of him. "You almost broke my holo-disc!"*

*Tommy, who was slumped uncomfortably across Wilbur's chest with his legs hanging off the end of the couch, rolled his eyes. "Your fault for taking the couch."*

*Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "There's literally a chair right there," he said, pointing to a plush chair only a few feet away from the couch.*

*"But I wanted the couch," Tommy protested, dropping more of his weight onto Wilbur as he went completely limp.*

*Huffing, Wilbur shoved Tommy to the side and began to try and roll off the couch. "Then I'll take the chair—"*

*"No!" Tommy cut him off, twisting around so he could wrap his arms around Wilbur's chest in what might've looked like a hug to an outsider, but felt closer to a constrictor trying to suffocate him. "You can't leave me. I need comfort, Wilbur."*

*Pausing, Wilbur frowned at Tommy. "Did something happen?"*

*Tommy nodded, his eyes wide. "Yes, something really fucking terrible happened."*

*Wilbur's heart skipped a beat. "What happened?"*

*"You're not gonna believe this, big brother of mine, but Foolish said I failed my maths test!"*

*Oh. That little shit.*

*The anxiety spike Wilbur had immediately faded as he frowned at his little brother.*

*"You scared me, Tommy! I thought it was something serious!"*

*"It is serious! I'm being given cruel and unusual punishment by my tutor!" He whined, burying his face into Wilbur's chest. "I think maths is a form of torture, y'know? It's fucking useless! When am I ever gonna need to know how to find the length of a goddamn triangle?"*

*Rolling his eyes, Wilbur decided to give up trying to escape Tommy's hold, and shifted so they were both sitting up against the couch. It was easier to just accept his fate than try to fight it, especially when Tommy was in a clingy mood.*

*"It teaches you problem solving and analytical thinking," Wilbur explained, resting a hand on top of Tommy's hair.*

*"I don't know what those things mean," Tommy grumbled, shoving his head into Wilbur's hand.*

*"You don't know what problem solving is?" Wilbur questioned, raising an eyebrow.*

*"Okay, well obviously I know what that means," Tommy said. "But why the fuck do I need to know how to analytically think about shit?"*

*"So you can be better at solving problems," Wilbur shot back, making Tommy groan. "You have to know how to take information you have and apply it to solve real world issues you're dealing with. Maths might seem useless, but it helps you build those skills in an abstract way."*

*Tommy groaned again. "You're an abstract way."*

*Wilbur couldn't stop himself from smiling at Tommy's petty insults. "That doesn't even make sense, dumbass."*

*"You don't make sense, bitch," Tommy shot back.*

*Huffing out a laugh, Wilbur leaned further into the couch cushions, and rested his chin on top of Tommy's head. "I do. You're just pissy that you failed maths."*

*"You're right, I am. Which is why I'm here."*

*"So you can complain to me?" Wilbur asked.*

*Tommy shook his head. "Because you'll make me feel better about it," he admitted, his voice much softer now.*

*Smile fading, Wilbur wrapped his arms around Tommy, pulling him into a proper hug.*

*"It's okay, Tommy. You can retake the test."*

*"I know," Tommy told him, his voice muffled by Wilbur's shirt. "I just feel stupid for failing it in the first place."*

*Sighing, Wilbur pulled away slightly so he could meet Tommy's eyes. "You're not stupid. You just need to take some time to study more. But it's okay not to get something the first time."*

*Taking a shaky breath, Tommy nodded. "Thanks, Wil."*

*"Of course, Tommy," Wilbur said, tucking Tommy under his chin again.*

Wilbur's pillar was being battered on all sides by the waves now, and water was flooding his nose. His legs were sore from pacing the room, and after a while, he resigned himself to sitting on the edge of the bed.

He waited, twisting his hands together until they were bright red.

He waited, tugging at the loose thread on his coat until he'd unraveled half the bottom hem.

He waited, with his heart in his throat and saltwater in his lungs.

He waited.

Eventually, the door opened.

Tommy's blonde curls stuck to the sweat on his forehead, his face bright red from exertion. He was shaking out his arms as he stepped into the room, but it was only after the door shut did he notice Wilbur sitting on the bed.

"Oh, you're here," Tommy said, giving Wilbur a once over before turning to head to the bathroom.

Wilbur had frozen when Tommy entered the room. But then he stiffened, climbing off the bed and to his feet before Tommy could even take one step away from him.

"Tommy, we need to talk."

A visible jolt shot through Tommy at that. He paused midstep, glancing over his shoulder at Wilbur with furrowed brows.

“Uh, about what?” He asked, looking genuinely confused. “Because if it can wait, I really wanna take a shower first-”

“It can’t wait,” Wilbur cut him off, surprised at the anger seething under his own words.

Tommy seemed to notice it too, because something inside of him shifted. He blinked once, before he straightened his shoulders and clenched his jaw, turning back to face Wilbur.

“Fine. What’s going on?”

Impatience bled through his tone, along with a thread of annoyance that set Wilbur’s nerves on edge. How *dare* he act like he’s the one inconvenienced by this. Like Wilbur’s causing a problem for him right now.

But how did Wilbur start this? He could barely hear himself think over the roaring in his ears now, let alone string together a sentence about everything that was going on inside of him.

A part of Wilbur didn’t want to ask. Because if he asked Tommy and he confirmed what Technoblade said, then that made it real. That meant his little brother really and truly betrayed him. But if he kept quiet, Wilbur could tell himself it was just Technoblade making it up. It would be ignorance, but sometimes ignorance was better than reality.

Except Wilbur knew the question would torment him endlessly until he got an answer. There was no peace in ignorance for him. Not anymore.

Wilbur was silent as he thought this over. Meanwhile, Tommy frowned.

“Are you gonna get on with it or what?” He snapped.

Shit. Guess he just had to rip the band aid off.

“I spoke with Technoblade today.”

And just like that, Tommy’s annoyance disappeared. His eyes went wide, and a horrible, painful weight settled deep inside Wilbur’s gut because he knew what that look meant.

That was the face Tommy made when he’d been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing. Wilbur had seen it hundreds of times over the years. When he got scolded for a prank, or was found stealing cookies from the kitchen—that wide-eyed look always filled his entire face.

Now, those wide, pale eyes were staring right into Wilbur’s own. And they were full of fear.

“You, uh, you did?” Tommy stammered, clearly forcing himself to sound casual. “What did you guys talk about?”

Wilbur clenched his jaw.



“I think you know what I’m going to say,” he said flatly.

A beat passed. And then another. Silence wrapped around them both, tying a string around Wilbur’s throat and threatening to choke him if something didn’t snap it in half.

Then,

“It was just a talk,” Tommy told him, his words now holding a razor-sharp edge to them that hadn’t been there before. “Nothing was made official. We were just talking about possibilities.”

“You mean the possibility of Eldingvegr joining the Empire,” Wilbur stated, curling his hands into fists at his sides. “You spoke with Technoblade about us joining, and you didn’t even have the fucking balls to tell me yourself. I had to hear it from *him*.”

If there had been ice between them before, then Wilbur definitely just heard another crack appear inside it.

“No decisions were made. We were just talking about it,” Tommy snapped, the fear disappearing from his eyes as icy flames took its place.

“It doesn’t fucking *matter* if you didn’t make any formal decisions. You told him you were willing to consider joining the Empire, and that’s as good as signing the goddamn surrender papers right then and there!” Wilbur snapped back, his voice booming over the room.

Tommy’s face twisted into a scowl.

“Well I hate to be the one to say it, but you need to wake the fuck up, Wilbur,” Tommy hissed. “We’ve run out of options. Either we join the Empire, or we lose Eldingvegr entirely. What would you rather do?”

A wave of anger rose up inside of Wilbur, the water melting away the last of the ice inside of him.

“We were going to make a compromise, Tommy!” Wilbur exclaimed, gesturing wildly into the air. “That’s the whole fucking point of negotiations! Philza and Technoblade want us to join the Empire, we don’t want to join the Empire. We work out an in between that works for everyone. Did you forget that was our entire goddamn plan?”

Tommy’s scowl deepened. “No, I didn’t forget. I realized that the plan was never going to work. Philza and Techno can just take the entire damn planet if they want. We literally don’t have another choice here, don’t you get it? It’s called political strategy, asshole.”

“You didn’t know any damn political strategy before we got here. Who taught you that? Technoblade?” Wilbur taunted, raising his eyebrows at Tommy.

“You’re such a fucking dick sometimes, do you know that?” Tommy asked instead of responding to the jab. “You treat me like I’m an idiot who can’t think for myself at all.”

“I do not!” Wilbur protested. “I never said you were an idiot, but right now you’re certainly being one because you’re letting Technoblade put ideas into your head!”

“Oh, you fucking-” Tommy cut himself off, taking a deep breath like he was struggling to stay calm. “I’m not fucking stupid like that. I know Techno wants us to join the Empire, I get it. But I haven’t only been talking to him!”

“Ah, yes, Ranboo,” Wilbur said, his words dripping with sarcasm as he nodded at Tommy. “Perfect impartial party right there.”

“I was talking about you, dickhead,” Tommy hissed.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. “It’s kind of hard to give you advice when you don’t tell me shit, Tommy.”

“Y’know, that’s a fair point. It feels pretty shitty for someone you trust not to tell you stuff, doesn’t it?”

...shit.

“I told you, nothing I talked about with Philza was relevant-”

“And I’m just supposed to believe that?” Tommy snapped, cutting him off. “You haven’t been acting like yourself for *months* now. You go off and talk with the fucking Emperor of the Antarctic Empire every day, you gave Jack permission to call you by your personal name, and you even went and got drunk with the asshole that punched you in the face, but you keep telling me we can’t trust anyone here.”

“Just because I’m talking to people doesn’t mean I trust them,” Wilbur shot back. “We can’t trust any of them, Tommy. No matter how friendly or genuine they seem. Especially not Technoblade or Philza.”

“Why not though?” Tommy challenged, eyes blazing with anger. “I know you say we can’t trust Philza and Technoblade to let us keep majority control of Eldingvegr like they say they will, but even the other leaders at the summit kept telling us that being under Empire rule wasn’t that bad.”

“For fuck’s sake, they wanted us to join the Empire too because that meant they’d get discounted blaziphane!” Wilbur argued, dragging his hands through his hair.

“That could be it, yeah. Or maybe some of them were being genuine! Maybe you need to stop thinking the worst of every single damn person you talk to!”

Wilbur glared at his brother. How could he be this blind?

“Tommy, do I need to remind you what happened the last time we trusted someone?” Wilbur hissed, narrowing his eyes. “Do I need to remind you that Eret took our trust and used it to try and get us *killed*?”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten,” Tommy forced out between gritted teeth. “But that’s one person who betrayed us. *One*.”

“Really? Just one?” Wilbur fixed Tommy with a dark glare. “Then what about Tubbo?”

At his words, Tommy flinched like he’d been slapped.

It was a low blow. Wilbur knew that. But he had to make Tommy understand that the people they knew here in the Antarctic Empire weren’t their friends. Technoblade didn’t actually give a shit. Neither did Philza, or Ranboo, or Puffy- they didn’t care.

“Tubbo didn’t want to do it. Eret forced him,” Tommy said, the blue flames burning brighter in his eyes than Wilbur had ever seen before.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Wilbur shot back.

Tommy glared at him for another moment, taking stuttered breaths through his nose.

“Even if Technoblade and Philza are lying and they’re not going to give us any control of Eldingvegr when they take it—which wouldn’t make sense because why wouldn’t they have just fucking taken it already then—we don’t have another choice, Wilbur.”

Wilbur couldn’t breathe. His thoughts were crashing down on one another, the seafoam was sizzling in his ears and his blood was like electric as it pumped through his veins. He couldn’t breathe and everything was just too much right now. Far too much.

“We can’t join the Antarctic Empire!” Wilbur exclaimed, his self-control quickly slipping. “And you’re a fucking idiot if you think that we can and it’ll be fine, because it won’t!”

“Why?” Tommy demanded, storming across the room until he was right in Wilbur’s face. “Why are you being such a stubborn prick right now that you won’t even consider it when it’s our only fucking choice?!”

His jaw was beginning to ache from how hard he was biting down.

“Because I’m trying to keep our planet safe!” Wilbur shouted, his voice echoing off the walls.

Tommy flinched away at the shouting, stumbling back from Wilbur with a kind of rage on his face that Wilbur had never seen anything close to before.

He stared at Wilbur for a long moment. His chest was heaving, and the flames in his eyes were sparking—even from several feet away, Wilbur could practically feel himself getting burnt.

Then,

“Mine.”

Wilbur blinked.

“What?”

“It’s not our planet. It’s *my* planet,” Tommy said, his eyes suddenly ice cold as the flames were snuffed out.

A beat passed. Wilbur didn’t understand what Tommy was saying.

“What are you talking about?” Wilbur asked, his voice having fallen back to a normal volume.

Tommy took one step back towards Wilbur. “In case you forgot, I’m the heir to the throne of Eldingvegr. It’s my planet, and you have no right to tell me what to do with it.”

The waves were slamming into every side of him now.

“What are you saying? I grew up on Eldingvegr too!” Wilbur argued, although his voice was strangled.

“You might have grown up there, but the right to rule Eldingvegr is in my *blood*. And you?”

Tommy took another step towards him, and Wilbur stumbled back as his little brother leaned in so close, he could feel Tommy’s breath on his face.

“You’re just a fucking bastard.”

At that moment, the world slowed down for Wilbur.

A wave more powerful than any other before it crashed into Wilbur with the force of a train. Pain radiated through his chest, and Wilbur gasped because he felt it crack. The last piece of his pillar broke off, and Wilbur could only watch as it fell beneath the waves.

Saltwater burned his lungs and his eyes.

He blinked, and found himself staring at a boy who had once been his brother, but felt like a complete stranger to him now.

Tommy had never cared about the fact that Wilbur was a bastard. It was never something they brought up. Sure, others taunted him with it, but Wilbur had always been reassured by one constant throughout his life. That Tommy was his, and he was Tommy’s. Half-brothers, but brothers all the same.

But now that wasn’t true. Wilbur found nothing but ice sitting behind Tommy’s eyes as he struggled to take in breath after breath.

It hurt. It hurt more than anything Wilbur had ever felt before. There was a bloody hole where his heart should be, and Tommy- *his* Tommy, didn’t seem to care one bit.

The water was covering his head. Everything was burning, and in the jagged ruins of his own mind, Wilbur felt the waves swelling once again. And this time, he latched onto it. He let the

anger build, because there was nothing to be afraid of anymore. He was already drowning, so why not dive headfirst into it?

Tommy's words had landed right where he wanted them to. But Wilbur knew Tommy better than anyone else, and if he wanted to play this game, then Wilbur knew exactly what to say next.

It was physically painful straightening his shoulders and moving around Tommy, clenching his jaw so hard, he was convinced he was going to crack a tooth in another minute or two. Blood welled up in his palms where he was digging his nails into them, and he listened to it drip onto the floor as he backed up towards the door.

"What are you doing?" Tommy asked once Wilbur was at the door, some of the coldness having faded from his eyes.

"If I'm just a bastard, then I shouldn't be sharing a room with royalty," Wilbur said, the cool tone of formal court speak slipping into his words without him even needing to try.

Tommy frowned. "Wait-"

His protests died on his tongue when Wilbur bowed, as deeply as he could go to make the knife plunge deeper. Years of etiquette training were the only thing that kept him standing at that moment, because otherwise he'd collapse on the floor right then and there.

"My apologies, Prince Theseus," Wilbur continued, his face blank and voice cold as he locked eyes with his little brother. "I'll be taking my leave now."

Horror washed over Tommy's face when he heard Wilbur say his formal name, but before he could say anything else, Wilbur was opening the door, and didn't look back as he walked out of the room with perfectly straight shoulders and a gaping hole in his chest.

## Chapter End Notes

fun fact I've had the "I'm trying to keep our planet safe" "mine" "what?" "my planet. not ours" dialogue exchange planned out since I wrote chapter 6 of this fic. I've been holding onto that for a LONG time and it felt so good to write.

I am sorry for the emotional damage though lmao

please let me know what you thought down in the comments below! feel free to scream! they seriously make my day :D

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

the spotify playlist for this fic can be found [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# sitting at the bottom of ocean

## Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone I'm backkkkkkk

so sorry this update took so long after leaving it on such a cliffhanger last time. I ended up getting an idea for a halloween fic that I had to speedrun to finish, and it took way longer than I thought it would. but we're finally back with this! and fuck man, it's a good chapter.

thank you all SO much for your response to the last chapter. seriously, I think I got more comments on that chapter alone than I have on any other chapter of this entire fic. seriously made me so happy to read through them all. sorry for the pain tho lmao.

now we're back! I keep thinking we're getting near the end of this fic and then I realize a mini arc I planned is gonna need more than 1 chapter to complete it so the numbers keep getting extended. right now the hypothetical final chapter count for this fic might be 27 chapters total, but literally a few weeks ago I thought the hypothetical chapter count would be 25 total so. I really don't know lol. we'll just wait and see.

TWs for this chapter: descriptions of a panic attack, minor self-harm (via punching a wall)

anyway that's all for now. hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Woosh.*

The door hissed as it slid shut behind Wilbur, and he stumbled out into the hall, his vision spinning as Tommy's words echoed in his ears.

*"You're just a fucking bastard."*

He was still struggling to wrap his head around it all. Tommy called him a bastard. Of all the people to use that against him, never in a thousand years would Wilbur have thought Tommy would do that to him. Not his little brother. Not his Tommy.

Ragged breaths rattled through his lungs as he stumbled down the hall, rushing water drowning out any other sound around him. Fury coursed through his veins and lodged itself in his throat. Wilbur had never been this angry before. Not in the way where it was drowning him from the inside out. Where it was filling up every nook and cranny in his mind until he didn't have a single cell free of it.

Turning to the wall, Wilbur slammed his fist as hard against it as he could, letting out a strangled cry of anger before cutting himself off, not wanting others to hear him.

Suddenly, there were hands on his arms pulling him away from the wall, and a face filled up his vision. Jack was saying something to him, but Wilbur could barely hear it over the screaming waves in his own head, and the pain radiating up and down his arm.

Before Wilbur could try to force himself to focus on what Jack was saying though, another figure appeared behind him. Jack's eyes went wide, and the warm hands grabbing his wrists disappeared.

Then, Jack's face was replaced with another. And Wilbur wasn't sure if he wanted to curse or cry when he saw who it was.

"Orpheus!" Philza's voice cut through the crashing waves, and just like that, all sound came rushing back at once. "What's going on?"

Wilbur could hear everything again. He could hear Jack, shifting nervously from foot to foot beside him. He could hear Philza's wings rustle and shift as they brushed against the floor. He could hear his own breathing, ragged and uneven like he'd just been sprinting.

"I- I don't-"

How could he explain what happened between him and Tommy? Fuck, *why* would he explain what happened? He wasn't supposed to confide in Philza. He couldn't share what just happened with anyone in the palace. If they knew that- that he and Tommy-

...actually, Wilbur didn't even know what he and Tommy were right now. And that was the most bone-chilling realization Wilbur had ever had.

"Hey, mate, breathe," Philza cut in, placing both his hands on Wilbur's shoulders. "You're gonna pass the fuck out if you keep hyperventilating."

Maybe that would be better. If Wilbur was unconscious, then he wouldn't have to deal with his reality right now. The anger was suffocating him, and the idea of trying to force a single word out seemed next to impossible.

"Is he having a panic attack?" Jack asked Philza.

"I- I'm not sure," Philza stammered, looking more bewildered than Wilbur had ever seen him. "Do you know what happened?"

Jack's jaw clenched, his eyes meeting Wilbur's. There was a silent question there. And the thing was, Wilbur knew he should've shook his head no. He should've told Jack not to share



what happened with Philza.

But Wilbur couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe and his head was spinning and the waves were getting loud again. He needed something—*anything*—to pull him back up for air.

So he nodded at Jack, and listened to the waves crash above him as he drifted down down *down*.

"He had a fight with Theseus," Jack admitted, glancing at Wilbur from the corner of his eye.

At this, Philza's eyes widened, a strange kind of understanding dawning over his face. A few beats passed as he considered this, something unreadable flashing through his gaze as he looked Wilbur over again, as if seeing him for the first time today.

"Oh, Orpheus."

Two words. Two simple words that were dripping with something that could've been pity—and Wilbur *would've* mistaken it for pity a few months before. But it wasn't pity. It was something else. Something... that Wilbur couldn't identify. It wasn't pity or sadness, but it wasn't joyful either. It was just different.

Right then though, Wilbur couldn't really bring himself to care what the underlying meaning of his words was. He was a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts and feelings as the anger and pain coursed through him, another breath stuttering in his chest as more saltwater entered his lungs.

Even though he had no clue where he wanted to go, all Wilbur knew was that he didn't want to be here right now.

"I- I can't-" his breathing hitched again, and he had to fight to finish his sentence, "my head is just- I can't breathe."

Philza nodded, his face smoothing out as he reached out again, digging his talons into Wilbur's shoulder. Not tight enough to hurt, but enough to snap at least part of Wilbur's spiraling mind back to the present.

"Let's get you out of here," Philza muttered.

Then, before Wilbur could ask where they were going, Philza was guiding him down the hall. The grip on his shoulder left no room for questions, but Wilbur found he didn't particularly care at this moment. His head was still spinning and his chest was too tight—the longer he stared at that plain black door, knowing his brother was standing right behind it-

His brother, or rather, his half-brother.

His half-brother, or rather, the Crown Prince of Eldingvegr.

Tommy, or rather, Prince Theseus.

Even through the door, Wilbur was convinced he could feel Tommy's cold eyes piercing straight through him. So he was grateful to be led away, pressed shoulder to shoulder with Philza, Jack right at his heels as they left his and Tommy's bedroom behind.

Wilbur kept his head down as they walked down the twisting corridors of the palace. The only sounds around them were the echoing of their footsteps off the stone floor, and Wilbur's ragged breathing as he struggled to keep himself upright.

His blood was boiling as they passed through another large set of doors—Wilbur only vaguely noticing they'd passed into Philza and Techno's personal wing of the palace. He didn't care where they were going, because all he could think about were Tommy's words echoing in his head.

*Bastard bastard bastard-*

Suddenly, they stopped.

"Jack, go find Techno and tell him to check on Theseus," Philza ordered.

Jack stiffened. "Oh, uh, should I come back after or-"

"I'll summon you when I need you again."

Wilbur glanced up just long enough to see Jack's mouth pressed into a thin line. It was clear he didn't want to leave Wilbur alone with Philza right then, but he also couldn't ignore an order from his Emperor.

He didn't want Jack to leave, but he knew that if he opened his mouth, he wouldn't be able to control *what* spilled out. So he let his eyes fall back to the floor, and another beat passed before Jack was backing away.

"Alright- I mean, uh, understood, Your Majesty."

With that, Wilbur listened to Jack's footsteps fade. Maybe he should've cared more, but the only things he could feel at that moment was the ice in his lungs and the salt in his mouth.

There was the sound of a door hissing open, and Philza led Wilbur into a familiar room. When Wilbur looked up, he saw they were in his office again, and suddenly Wilbur realized why Philza had taken him here.

The nearest guards were at the entrance to the personal wing. Jack was gone. The door was heavy.

No one could hear Wilbur in here.

No one except Philza.

The talons gripping his shoulder loosened, and Philza took a step back.

"It's just us, mate."

It was just Wilbur and Philza, a man who he had told himself time and time again he couldn't trust. A man who wanted to take Eldingvegr from him and Tommy and make it his own. A man who told Wilbur he wanted to carve into him—turn him into something new.

But Philza was also a man who understood Wilbur better than he understood himself. A man who told him he was worth more than what others thought of him. A man who listened to his anger and told him how not to drown in it, but to use it.

Philza was a man who called Wilbur *little bird* in a way that made it sound like he could actually care about Wilbur.

It was just the two of them, and Wilbur's chest ached too much to hold it in anymore.

Meeting Philza's eyes, Wilbur tried to take another breath. When it stuttered once more, he twisted his fingers into his hair.

Then, he screamed.

The sound that ripped from his throat was so strangled, so full of rage and hurt that it sounded more animal than human. He screamed as he hunched over, pulling on his hair as tight as he could, relishing in the pain that flashed through his skull because of it.

He couldn't breathe and he couldn't think. There were too many things flying around his head for him to process anything besides the scream scraping against his throat.

"He betrayed me!" Wilbur shouted, letting go of his hair to slam a fist against the wall. "After- After everything I've done for him, he fucking- he tossed me aside!"

*Slam!*

"I thought we were a team!"

*Slam!*

"I hate him! I fucking hate him!"

*Slam!*

Wilbur's fist was throbbing horribly now. His throat was raw and his chest was heaving. Strands of his own hair were caught between his fingers, and his scalp ached where he'd ripped them out.

Taking another stabbing breath, Wilbur wound up for one final punch.

*SLAM!*

He cried out as pain flashed up his arm. His fist dropped to his side, and Wilbur stood there, staring at the wall as he used all the willpower he had left not to let the threat of tears make themselves known.

A beat passed. Wilbur slumped, resting his forehead against the wall.

“I don’t hate him,” he whispered to himself. “It’s my fault this happened. I drove him away.”

Suddenly, there was a hand resting lightly on his back, and Wilbur flinched as if he’d been slapped. His head snapped up, and he found himself face to face with Philza again.

Philza gave him a knowing look. One that told Wilbur he knew exactly the kind of anger and pain that was filling up every cell in his body right now.

And just like that, the single string holding Wilbur upright snapped. He stumbled forward, clutching the front of Philza’s cloak like it was the only thing keeping him from disappearing into the void. He dug his fingers so tightly into the fabric, he could feel the blood moving under his skin. His legs shook violently beneath him, and he knew that if he let go, he would collapse in a heap on the ground.

“He called me a bastard,” Wilbur confessed, having lost all control of his words the minute he’d stepped out of his and Tommy’s room.

His voice shook, and his eyes burnt, but no tears spilled down his cheeks. The last modicum of control he had left. Whatever happened, he was not going to cry in front of Emperor Philza.

He wasn’t going to cry over this at all. Tommy didn’t deserve his tears.

Philza didn’t say anything in response. Instead, his hands covered the hands Wilbur had twisted into the fabric of his cloak. He gently pried Wilbur’s fingers away, before bending down, dragging Wilbur to the floor.

Relief surged through his legs now that they no longer had to hold him up. The hands holding onto Wilbur’s let go, and he found himself *aching* for the warmth again. Because he couldn’t remember the last time Tommy had held his hand. The last hug they’d shared was something forced and cold, only made bearable by the haze of alcohol.

A new haze had settled over him this time. His blinding rage began to fade, and the weight of grief settled over his shoulders. It pushed him closer to Philza, desperate for some kind of warmth as ice crawled up his chest.

Somehow, they both ended up sitting against the wall. Wilbur was tucked into Philza’s shoulder, pressed side to side as he curled in as close as he’d allow himself. A few long seconds ticked by where Philza sat, stiff as a board and clearly at a loss for what to do. But after nearly a minute, Wilbur felt him shift, and there was the sound of rustling feathers as a wing arched over Wilbur’s back.

For a long while, neither of them said anything.

Wilbur stared out at the office, his eyes dry and his throat sore. The rage had settled back down to its usual quiet, smoldering state. Except now Wilbur was no longer fighting against

the waves. He was under the water, looking up above his head and watching them crash on top of one another with a sort of distant fascination.

The water was cold, but the shoulder his face was pressed into was warm. The wing wrapped around his back was warm. To his surprise, he learned that the Ice King himself was *warm*.

“I don’t know what to do now,” Wilbur finally whispered, wincing when speaking sent another flash of pain through his throat. “I’m supposed to be his advisor, but if I’m not that...” He trailed off. The answer was clear enough.

If he wasn’t Tommy’s advisor, if he wasn’t Tommy’s *brother*, then what was he?

He was nothing. Nothing at all.

“You’ll figure it out,” Philza said after a moment. “You don’t need to rush this. It’s okay to not know who you are or what you’re supposed to be doing for a bit while you figure your shit out.”

Wilbur almost huffed out a bitter laugh at that, because Philza made it sound so simple. He could just wait to figure it out. Like there wasn’t an invisible timer over his and Tommy’s heads. Like it wasn’t only a matter of time until Eldingvegr was nothing more than another conquest for Philza.

A part of him wanted to ask Philza what happened now. How long they had left until they put the treaty in front of Tommy, and handed him a pen to sign it. He wanted to ask what would happen to him if that happened. If he’d go back to Eldingvegr with Tommy, or if Philza would want him to stay here.

But those were questions that Wilbur didn’t want to know the answer to right now. No matter what, he doubted he would like the answers Philza gave him. He’d already pushed past his own ignorance quite enough for today.

So he stayed quiet, and just pressed himself closer to the warmth. It was such a contrast to the last hug he’d had with Tommy. How much distance there had been between the two of them, despite the fact that they were literally wrapped in each other’s arms. Right now with Philza, there was no cold distance lingering in the air. Sure, it wasn’t as close or as familiar as it used to be when he and Tommy hugged, but it was the warmest he’d felt in a long time.

“Did you hurt your hand?” Philza then asked after another few minutes had passed.

Blinking, Wilbur glanced down at the hand he’d slammed against the wall. When he tried to flex the fingers, more pain lanced up his arm, making him flinch.

“Oh, little bird,” Philza murmured when he saw that. “We’ll get that treated soon. Hopefully nothing’s broken.”

Wilbur hummed, although he really didn’t care about his hand right now. Instead, his mind fixated on the other thing Philza had said. Something he’d heard so many times now, but never had the courage to ask about.

It was all cards on the table right now though. There was no point in trying to keep up appearances for him anymore. So why not?

“Why do you call me little bird?” Wilbur asked, keeping his eyes fixed on his bright red hand. “I thought it was an insult the first time you said it to me, but it hasn’t felt like that for a while now.”

Another moment stretched between them as Philza kept his own eyes fixed on the opposite wall.

“It’s not an insult,” Philza told him, sounding as though he was treading a very careful line. “It’s something that was said on Elytra a lot as a... term of endearment, I suppose you could call it.” He paused then, and Wilbur glanced up to see his brows furrowing. “It was something parents usually called their children.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

There were implications there. Ones that Wilbur wasn’t sure he wanted to acknowledge.

...but he wasn’t upset about it. If anything, there was a measure of relief that came with knowing it wasn’t an insult.

“Back on Eldingvegr I got called a lot of things,” Wilbur said, eyes falling back to his injured hand. “The servants would sometimes call me örlen, which means foreigner in Eldingvegrian.”

Philza made an annoyed noise at this. “Well that’s fucking rude.”

Wilbur huffed. “Yeah, it- it hurt. I kind of preferred it when they just called me a bastard, because... I don’t know. It felt more personal when they insulted me in Eldingvegrian instead of in Common.” He took a breath, and found that while his lungs ached, there was no struggle now to fill them up. “I think the worst though was if anyone ever called me Sóti.”

“Sóti?” Philza questioned. “Isn’t that one of your names?”

“My Eldingvegrian name,” Wilbur explained. “The King, Tommy’s father, gave it to me after he and my mother got married. As a sign that I was a Prince of Eldingvegr now. But I think it was worse than if he’d just not given me an Eldingvegrian name at all.”

“Why not?”

“The King chose the name Sóti to make it very clear what he thought about me,” he admitted, using his uninjured hand to pick at the threads of his coat. “In Eldingvegrian, Sóti usually translates to soot, like from burning something. But it also means dirt.”

The wing draped over him curled closer. Then, Philza nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Dirt,” he muttered, his voice tight. “Out of curiosity, what does Theseus’ Eldingvegr name mean?”

A bitter laugh bubbled up from Wilbur’s chest. “Íóni means beloved.”

“Ah, I see.” Wilbur watched Philza take this in, another unreadable thing flashing through his eyes. “I like soot though. Soot implies there was a fire. One that was caused by a lack of care or attention, because they underestimated its power.” He paused, looking down at Wilbur for the first time since they’d sat on the floor. “And fire always makes room for new growth from the ashes.”

Wilbur didn’t think of himself as a fire. He didn’t think of himself as having that kind of destructive tendency, even when he was at his most upset. And he certainly didn’t think that there was anything left from him that could grow anew.

But Philza said it with such confidence that Wilbur almost wished it was true.

Another few minutes of silence passed. Under the waves, Wilbur felt distanced from everything around him. He wasn’t better. But he’d calmed down. The hollow ache of grief was already filling the hole in his chest, but his exhaustion was keeping it at bay for the time being.

He didn’t have to think about Tommy right now. Instead, he could just... float.

Listening to Philza’s soft breaths, Wilbur found his eyes fluttering shut. It was so much easier to drift away right now. To a place where he didn’t have to think about everything that was falling apart.

“Thank you, Philza,” Wilbur murmured, his voice low as the edges of his mind blurred with sleep.

The wing against his back curled closer, and distantly, Wilbur thought about how Philza’s feathers were far softer than he’d expected them to be.

“Call me Phil, little bird,” came a quiet reply.

If Wilbur had been more awake, he would’ve thought about what kind of move Philza was trying to pull with that. He would’ve debated his motives. He would’ve questioned whether it was genuine or not.

But he was exhausted beyond belief. So he didn’t question the request.

“Okay, Phil,” he whispered.

At this, Phil let out a quiet sigh, and that was the last thing Wilbur heard before he drifted off to sleep.



When Wilbur woke up, the first thing he noticed was that it was quiet.

Over the past few months, Wilbur had grown used to waking up to the sound of Tommy's soft snores in his ears. Sometimes he'd wake up to the shower running. Or maybe he'd wake up to a low shifting as Tommy climbed out of the bed.

But there was no snoring.

No shower.

No shifting.

There was only the sound of Wilbur's own breathing, and nothing more.

As soon as he realized he was alone, the events of the previous day filtered back into his mind. His eyes flew open, and he found himself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling, in an unfamiliar bed.

For a few moments, Wilbur was too caught up in the memories of the day before to even think about where he could be. Instead, all he could focus on was the grief that washed over him, filling up his lungs and blocking his throat as Tommy's words rang in his ears, followed by his own.

His breathing hitched, and he felt his eyes burn again. But he blinked it away, doubling down on his effort not to waste tears on Tommy. He focused on taking deep breaths, in and out with the rolling waves. There were far more muffled than they'd ever been before. He sat at the bottom of the ocean, watching them crash leagues above him as their distant roar echoed in his mind.

The burning passed. Wilbur sat up and looked around the strange room he'd found himself in.

The room was somewhat bigger than the one he'd shared with Tommy, but not by much. A rich teal blanket was draped over his legs, with lighter blue sheets that were as soft as silk underneath him. A gauzy canopy stretched over the bed, glittering with shades of silver and blue in a way that reminded him of the shifting colors of the ice caverns outside. Then, there was a fireplace across the room, with a full couch and rug settled in front of it. A desk and a wardrobe made up the other sides of the room, with two doors sitting adjacent to one another. Wilbur assumed it was the door to the bathroom, and the door leading out of the room, considering they were in the same place the doors in his own bedroom were.

All in all, it seemed like a somewhat fancier version of a guest bedroom in the palace. He thought back to the day before, and how he'd fallen asleep on Philza-

Phil. He'd asked Wilbur to call him Phil.

Wilbur sat there for a moment, turning over his conversation with Philza/Phil in his mind. He'd spilled so much to the Emperor, and he knew he should've been upset with himself for that. But strangely enough, he couldn't bring himself to care.

He also knew that he shouldn't be okay with calling the Emperor *Phil*. They weren't friends. He had to remind himself of that. And he certainly wasn't going to give out his own personal



name in turn.

...still. There wasn't much of a point in refusing to call him Phil outside of just wanting to be a dick. And considering how well Phil had put up with his breakdown, Wilbur didn't want to be a dick to him. Not when he'd shown Wilbur far more kindness than he deserved.

Suddenly, Wilbur noticed a tightness around his hand. He glanced down and saw bandages wrapped around the fingers he'd slammed into the wall the day before. When he tried to move them, a few sparks of pain flashed up his arm, but it was nothing compared to how badly it had hurt before.

It was then Wilbur actually looked down at himself, and realized he'd slept fully clothed, including his shoes. He frowned and undid the laces of his boots, wincing when his fingers ached in protest. When he tossed the shoes to the ground, he pushed to his feet, the cold from the stone floor seeping through his socks and sending chills up his spine.

After taking off his overcoat, Wilbur padded over to the wardrobe and pulled it open. To his surprise, the clothes he'd had in his and Tommy's room were right there, hanging neatly inside. Something panged through Wilbur's chest when he noticed how empty the wardrobe looked without Tommy's clothes also there, but he tried not to let himself dwell on that as he picked out things to change into.

There was one thing hanging in the closet that hadn't been in his and Tommy's room. It was a coat—far longer than his own, and made of a shimmering grey fabric. It had pale blue and teal stars embroidered over the shoulders, down the arms, trailing towards the bottom of the coat. The minute Wilbur saw it, he thought back to the bacteria in the cave Phil had shown him so long ago. A night sky trapped so many miles underground.

A moment passed as he stared at the coat. Then, he reached for it.

A few minutes later, Wilbur had changed into fresh clothes. Maybe he should've taken the time to shower, but he couldn't muster up the energy for it. There was a headache throbbing in his temples, and his limbs were heavy, making him move as if he were underwater.

Once he was dressed again, he found himself at a loss for what to do.

Wilbur still had no idea what part of the palace he was in. He also wondered if Tommy knew where he was, or if he'd at least been told that Wilbur was spending the night somewhere else.

Did he wait for Wilbur? Pacing around the room, worried about where his older brother was?

Or did he not care? Maybe he was glad to finally be rid of him.

...Wilbur didn't know which one it was. And he wasn't sure which answer was more painful.

Eyeing the door leading out of the room, Wilbur shifted from foot to foot, having put his boots back on after changing his socks. When he stepped outside those doors, then it was

officially the next day. There was no doubt that the daily routine he'd developed in the palace was gone now, but that meant he had to find out what happened next.

The burning hand of anxiety clawed up his throat. Wilbur winced, and took deep breaths of the cold air to calm himself down.

When he opened his eyes again, he knew there was no sense in putting it off any longer. So he walked up to the door, and stepped outside into the hall.

While the hallway itself didn't look all that different from any other hallway in the palace, Wilbur liked to think he knew his way around at least a good amount of the palace. This hall though... he'd never been down this way before. That much he could tell.

But before he could start worrying about getting lost, a voice called out.

"Oi! You're finally awake?"

The relief that washed over Wilbur was almost enough to make him collapse.

"Jack, thank fuck you're here," Wilbur breathed out when he spotted Jack leaning against the wall.

Pushing off the wall, Jack grinned when Wilbur said his name. "Yes yes, sing your praises for me, Jack Manifold, the best guard in this entire damn palace."

Despite the weight on his shoulders, Wilbur found himself huffing out a weak laugh. "I wouldn't go that far. Don't need your ego getting too big now."

"My ego is already massive in case you couldn't tell," Jack joked, walking over so he was standing right in front of Wilbur. "And you better get used to it, because you're not getting rid of me anytime soon."

The way Jack said that didn't sound like a joke. It was like there was a deeper meaning to his words, and Wilbur frowned at him. "What do you mean by that?"

Jack opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated. The smile slowly faded from his face, and his eyes darted to the ground.

"I've been reassigned. I'm no longer both yours and Theseus' personal guard. I'm only assigned to you now."

Wilbur blinked. "Who's Tommy's guard then?"

"Techno assigned Puffy to escort him wherever he needs," Jack explained, biting the inside of his cheek. "Philza said it just made sense since you two aren't sleeping in the same room. At least at the moment."

Oh.

Although Wilbur hadn't expected to go back to staying in the same room as Tommy for at least a few days, it was jarring to hear that Phil thought the same. He wondered if Phil had just worked that out from what Wilbur had told them of their fight, or if Tommy had spoken to Technoblade about their sleeping arrangements.

At the very least, Wilbur was glad that Jack was staying with him.

"Are you okay, Wilbur?" Jack then asked, his voice dropping lower. "I felt bad just fucking ditching you with the Emperor yesterday, but he gave me an order so it's not like I could say no."

Wilbur shook his head. "I don't blame you for that. You had orders, and I wasn't really... in my right head about everything anyway."

Jack nodded. "Did the Emperor, like, help you calm down or something?"

Well... that was one way of putting it.

"We talked," Wilbur said, having no desire to tell Jack about how he'd punched the wall, or ended up clinging to Phil like an overgrown child. "And yeah, it helped."

"That's good. I mean, I figured it probably went okay considering you're staying in the personal wing now, but I just wanted to check."

Wait, *what*?

"Is that where we are?" Wilbur asked, frowning as he looked around the hall.

Jack's eyes widened. "Wait, do you not know where you are?"

"No, I-" Wilbur frowned, eyes dropping to the ground. "I was just so out of it yesterday, I think I fell asleep in Phil's office."

A beat passed where Jack blinked at him, looking confused at something he'd said. Before Wilbur could ask him what was wrong though, Jack was shaking his head and continuing on.

"Oh, I guess that makes sense. Yeah, I was told that at least for now you're gonna be staying in one of the spare bedrooms in the Emperor and Imperator's personal wing."

That was unexpected.

Why would Phil have him stay in the personal wing of the palace? Was it so he could avoid Tommy easier if he needed? This certainly lowered the chance of Wilbur running into him in the hallways, which was something he wasn't sure if he could handle right now. But at the same time, it was strange to think that was the only reason. There had to be more to it.

Was... Was this to signify Wilbur was no longer a 'guest' in the palace, but something more?

There were two ways Wilbur could think about this. One, this was a move to show Wilbur that he wasn't going to be leaving the Empire anytime soon. A power play to remind him that

the game was nearly lost, and Eldingvegr was practically theirs.

The other way he could think about that was something he wasn't sure he was ready to consider. Because it held the same implications that Wilbur had ignored when Phil explained to him where the nickname *little bird* came from.

In the end, he just decided not to think about it for the time being.

"I see," Wilbur muttered, unsure of what else to say.

An awkward silence stretched out between them. Jack also seemed unsure of where to go from here.

At least until he seemed to remember something.

"Oh! Yeah, also, since you're staying in the personal wing, I was told to tell you that you're welcome to eat meals in the Emperor's personal dining room if you want," Jack explained, straightening up again. "If you don't want to, that's fine. You can still have meals brought to your room, or you can go to the dining hall in the main part of the palace as well. But the option's there."

Now *this* took Wilbur by surprise.

"You mean... join Phil for his meals?"

Jack shrugged. "If he's there when you're there, yeah, pretty much. But sometimes he takes meals in his office or his bedroom, so you might miss each other." He paused. "The Imperator also takes his meals there too."

The Imperator. Technoblade.

Wilbur could just join Phil and Technoblade for meals? That didn't sound right. Of course, if they wanted to speak about something private while they ate Wilbur was sure they'd just send him away. But it was still something that seemed too personal. An invitation that shouldn't be extended to a foreign prince.

That's also what made it so intriguing though. As much as Wilbur didn't like the idea of eating breakfast next to fucking Technoblade, there had to be a reason Phil extended the offer.

"Is breakfast still being served?" Wilbur asked, pushing his hair back from his face.

"Yup. You're right on time, actually." Jack then tapped the earpiece in his ear, listening to something for a moment before nodding. "Philza's in there right now, if you'd like to go join him."

Wilbur considered saying no. He could just order food to his room, and avoid whatever strange goal Phil had with this offer.

But then Wilbur thought about eating alone. He'd sit in that unfamiliar room, staring at the wall while his fight with Tommy played on loop in his mind. Despite the temporary

distraction he got from talking to Jack, he didn't feel any better than he had before. In fact, he felt completely hollowed out now, the heaviness in his heart distant, but still there. If he ate alone, the distance would shrink. The feelings would become far too real again, and Wilbur would drown in them just like he did the day before.

He needed a distraction. At least for now.

"Take me there."

With a single nod, Jack turned on his heel and led Wilbur down the hallway. They passed a few more doors that looked similar to his own, and Wilbur wondered if they were also spare bedrooms. There weren't nearly as many doors as there were in the guest wing of the main palace though, and Wilbur wondered how many bedrooms they had total in the personal wing.

They turned down another hall, and Wilbur stiffened when they passed by the training room. It was silent in there, and a quick glance confirmed it was empty. Wilbur let out a sigh of relief, but was unnerved by the fact that at any point he could leave his room and find Tommy right down the hall.

...it was so strange to be so nervous about seeing his own brother. It felt wrong. But Wilbur wasn't ready to face Tommy yet after the things they'd said to each other. He didn't want to find out where they stood now in the aftermath.

Jack led him past the large doors that separated the personal wing from the main part of the palace. The hall opened up into a large foyer, with a towering archway leading into the dining room itself. There were two guards standing in front of the archway, and they both nodded at Wilbur when he passed through, not seeming surprised in the slightest that he was there.

The first thing Wilbur noticed about the dining room were the windows. They were similar to the windows that lined the way to Phil's office, stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and showing off the glittering expanse of Zephys IV's capital city that awed Wilbur every time he saw it.

The second thing Wilbur noticed was how small the table was. Admittedly, it wasn't a *small* table per se, but compared to the table that made up the main dining hall it certainly was. At most the table could probably seat eight people, and was made of the same smooth marble the other dining table was.

Only one of the eight chairs was occupied. Phil sat at the head of the table, picking at a plate of food with one hand, while he used the other to scroll through a holo-pad. However, as soon as Wilbur and Jack's footsteps echoed off the walls, Phil looked up, surprise flashing over his face when he saw who it was.

"Oh, Orpheus, you're awake."

*Orpheus.*

For some reason, Wilbur had been bracing himself to hear Phil call him by his personal name. He would've told him off for it, and reminded him that just because he said Wilbur could call him Phil didn't mean that Wilbur had extended him the same courtesy.

But he didn't need to do that. Phil wasn't trying to push that, and Wilbur was strangely relieved about it.

"I, um," Wilbur blinked, straightening his shoulders. "I was told I could come eat with you if I liked?"

"Yes, of course," Phil nodded, gesturing to the table. "Sit down wherever you like. Do you have any requests for what you want to eat?"

Wilbur didn't have the slightest bit of an appetite, so he shook his head. "I'm fine with anything."

Nodding, Phil tapped a few things on his holo-pad, then looked up again. "Alright, they'll just bring you the same thing I'm having."

From what Wilbur could see, Phil was eating something that looked like grilled vegetables, along with some thin pancakes wrapped around slices of roasted meat. It was similar fare to what was served in the dining hall, and Wilbur was a little surprised that an Emperor didn't seem to eat anything more... fancy.

A beat passed, and Wilbur noticed Phil was staring at him expectantly. Then, he realized he hadn't sat down, and scanned the chairs to figure out where he should place himself.

If he sat on the other end of the table from Phil, that could be taken as him trying to distance himself from the Emperor. Maybe that's what he should be going for, considering the mess he'd made of himself the night before.

But... Wilbur didn't want to. It would just make conversation more awkward.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he sat down at the chair immediately to Phil's right. Thankfully, Phil didn't blink twice at this, and just hummed as he tapped a button to put his holo-pad on sleep mode.

A second ticked by.

Then another.

Wilbur should say something. He knew he should. But everything was muffled. His movements were sluggish and his thoughts drifted aimlessly from one subject to another, never lingering there long. He was tired. Not physically, but emotionally. He didn't want to think about Tommy, or what mind game Phil could be playing now, or even what Phil was reading on his holo-pad.

Existing was exhausting. More so than it had ever been before.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I had one of our doctors look at your hand while you slept. I didn’t want to wake you, but I also didn’t want to leave it untreated till morning in case it was broken and you moved it in your sleep,” Phil finally said after a few minutes. “Thankfully, nothing’s broken, but they suspect you might’ve bruised the bones. So you just need to keep from moving your hand too much for the time being.”

Wilbur stared at his bandaged hand and nodded without saying anything. At least he didn’t break anything.

“You’re not in any pain, are you?” Phil pushed after another minute.

“No,” Wilbur told him, still staring at his hand. “It’s alright.”

He didn’t offer anything besides that. There was another beat, like Phil was considering asking him something else.

Before he could though, there was the sound of footsteps, and Wilbur jumped when a plate of food was being put in front of his face. Although the food looked perfectly prepared, Wilbur’s stomach turned at the idea of eating, and he slumped down further in his chair as the servant’s footsteps faded once more.

A minute passed. There was a soft clinking noise as Phil ate more of his own meal.

Then, he stopped.

“You’re not eating,” Phil pointed out.

Wilbur stared at the plate, Phil’s words muffled through the water in his ears.

“I’m not hungry.”

There was a beat of silence. Wilbur wondered if Phil would be upset at him for asking for food when he wasn’t going to eat it. It was a dick move on his end, he knew that.

Instead though, he heard Phil’s talons tap against his holo-pad again. Then,

“I’ve been reading something I think you might be interested in.”

...huh?

Wilbur finally looked up from the table to meet Phil’s eyes. “What is it?”

“Well, I’m not one to read much,” Phil began, using his finger to swipe through the text on the holo-pad, “but Techno told me that when you’re both in the library, he always sees you reading books on the histories or cultures of other planets. I figured you haven’t read much about Elytra, but I have a few books in my personal library I got from my parents, so I thought you might be interested in hearing some of what it says.”

While it was difficult for Wilbur to say he felt much of anything right now besides the hollowness ringing through him, he had to admit, there was a small spark inside of him

hearing Phil mention texts from Elytra.

“I... wouldn’t mind hearing some of it,” Wilbur said after a beat.

Although Phil didn’t fully smile at this, there was a hint of it in the curve of his lips. “Alright. Let me read you this paragraph I was just looking at.” He cleared his throat and readjusted the holo-pad so it was easier for him to see.

Then, he began to read.

““A planet of steep cliffs and towering trees, almost all organisms native to Elytra had some capability of flight. The Elytrians themselves built cities into the towering rock spires of the expansive canyons that dotted the planet’s surface. Many structures were only accessible through flight. However, this proved to cause issues for Elytrians that didn’t have the ability to fly—whether through injury or congenital defect. So to combat this, Elytra ended up being one of the forefront planets regarding hover technology. This also translated to aerospace engineering, leading Elytra to produce some of the best air and spacecrafts in the wider galaxy...””

As Phil read, Wilbur was able to lose himself in the words. He pictured Elytra in his mind, with its tall rock spires and cities built into stone—and drifted in those images as the water lapped above his head.

Eventually, he started eating some of his breakfast. He only finished half of it, and ended up resting his forehead on the table once he was full, letting himself doze to Phil’s calm voice.

Everything hurt. His lungs, his hand, his *heart*. He missed Tommy, and he felt that ache in every breath he took. But it hurt to miss him just as much. It was an endless loop he found himself trapped in, and he didn’t know how to get out.

But when a hand came to rest on the back of his neck, razor sharp talons tracing small circles there, Wilbur found himself leaning into it. The table was uncomfortable to use as a pillow, but he didn’t consider moving away.

It should’ve hurt.

It didn’t.

## Chapter End Notes

well... wilbur is in a very different position now than he was expecting, isn't he?

one thing I ask all of you to keep in mind when reading this fic is that we are only in wilbur's head. we're not in tommy's, and we're certainly not in phil's. never just assume you can guess what's going through another character's head because it's probably more complicated than you think.



anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed this one! it's, um, kind of the comfort part of hurt/comfort? there's a lot of problems still but hey! we got a hug! kinda!

ok that's enough rambling for now. please let me know what you thought down in the comments below!! I don't know how long it's going to take me to get the next chapter up because I need to update my other ongoing fic, [strings of fate](#), and then next week I'm gonna be insanely busy all the way from friday to thursday. so we'll see.

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE> (they also got a sneak peek at this chapter a few days ago)

there's a spotify playlist for this fic! check it out [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees ! if you wanna hear a lot of behind the scenes tidbits, worldbuilding details, or just read a lot of analysis on this fic, make sure to check out my tumblr! under the tag #the stars and their children on my blog you'll see I answer a lot of asks analyzing this fic and give out a lot of my own thoughts about what's going on. it's a fun time :)

# judging eyes cast his way

## Chapter Summary

Not everyone is happy about Wilbur's new living situation.

## Chapter Notes

HI EVERYONE I'M BACK!! sorry it took so long for this update, a whole lot of stuff happened all at once so I've just been insanely busy! I had a trip out of town, and then I had a friend fly into town pretty much the day after I got back, I dropped a shit ton of money on a new tattoo (worth it though), we're having a VERY busy time at work, and then I had a covid scare! (tested negative but I'm not sure if it's a false negative or not?? idk I'm treating it like covid just in case)

anyway so, uh, yeah. a lot of stuff happened all at once. also, this probably isn't the best place to announce it but if you read my other works, then my other ongoing fic right now, strings of fate, is going to be on a kind of unofficial hiatus? the thing is, I really want to work on it. it's not for lack of motivation or inspiration. but I also really want to focus on stars for the time being. I never intended it to take this long to finish stars, and I would love to try and finish it before the end of the year. I don't actually know if that's possible, but I'm gonna try my best so we'll see. I'll probably still write some other things in the meantime, but I just don't want the pressure of having to update another ongoing multi chapter while I'm trying to focus on stars, so strings isn't abandoned! it's just put on the backburner for now. sorry about that :(

ok that was a lot of rambling. hope you guys enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, Wilbur found himself wandering.

He was still getting used to the fact that he was staying in the personal wing, and essentially had free reign of the place. The night before, he'd struggled to fall asleep. His room had been too silent without Tommy's soft breaths to accompany his own, and he tossed and turned until he grew so tired he hadn't even realized he'd fallen asleep until he woke up.

Today, Wilbur was tired. The bags under his eyes were darker than usual, and his thoughts kept drifting aimlessly from topic to topic. An ache still lingered in his chest, spreading through his limbs and weighing down his heart every time he thought about Tommy. The

water was still covering his head, but he wasn't drowning in it. He could breathe, it was just a bit more difficult than before.

It was getting more manageable with each passing day. That didn't mean it was okay.

This morning over breakfast, Phil read Wilbur more from his text on Elytra. Unlike the day before though, Wilbur didn't rest his head on the table, despite how badly he wanted to. He forced his shoulders straight, and tried to eat what he could, although he still only ate about half his food. His eyes were heavy, but he kept them open through sheer force of will. Phil seemed to notice his exhaustion but hadn't commented on it. He just read. Read without waiting for Wilbur to ask. Read without the expectation of any conversation. And Wilbur was so unbelievably grateful for that weight to not be on his shoulders, because he couldn't carry anything else. Not anymore.

After breakfast, Phil had left the dining room, citing that he had work to attend to but Wilbur was welcome to come find him if he needed anything. So now, Wilbur found himself wandering without a purpose. If he stayed in his room, he was going to drive himself nuts staring at the wall. But if he left the personal wing, he was running the risk of bumping into Tommy, which was something he knew he wouldn't be able to handle right now.

Jack followed behind him as Wilbur walked along the halls, avoiding eye contact with the other guards and letting his gaze trail along the glittering cityscape that sat outside the windows. His footsteps echoed off the walls, bouncing down the corridor like discordant music. He tried to ignore the gaping hole in his chest. The one that let frigid wind pass straight through him and made him feel as though his blood was pouring out of his chest in time with the waves crashing above his head. If he let his mind wander further than his legs, he could almost hear the saltwater blood dripping from his fingertips and onto the floor beneath him.

A beat of his heart.

*Thump.*

A droplet of water.

*Drip.*

*Thump.*

*Drip.*

*Thump.*

*Drip.*

He turned a corner, and pink flashed in his peripheral vision.

*Thump.*

“Orpheus?”

*Drip.*

Shit.

Stopping in his tracks, Wilbur grit his teeth, and had to force himself to turn around to face a man he really did not want to see right now.

“Technoblade,” Wilbur greeted, dipping his head with a wince.

Silence hung between them, thick and twisted as it coiled around Wilbur’s throat. The last time he’d seen the Emperor, he’d told Wilbur the very thing that decimated the little stability he had left. That Tommy was moving forward with the discussions without consulting him. That Tommy had *betrayed* him.

The last time he’d seen the Emperor, Wilbur had run out of the library with Technoblade calling after him. Now, he desperately wanted to repeat the past. He wanted to run. To get far away from Technoblade and avoid whatever new, terrible thing he could tell Wilbur about his brother.

But he forced himself to stand his ground and meet Technoblade’s eyes.

Another beat passed.

Then,

“You’re... in the personal wing.”

It wasn’t a question, and Technoblade didn’t seem very surprised. But he still looked like he was taken aback seeing Wilbur here.

“Uh, yes, I am. Did Phil not tell you?” Wilbur asked, furrowing his brows.

Technoblade blinked. “Yeah, he did. I just wasn’t expectin’ to run into you.”

Wilbur forced his face to remain impassive as he shrugged. “I was just walking around. As far as I’m aware, I’m allowed to explore.”

“Oh, yeah, you are,” Technoblade nodded. He paused then, a frown flashing over his face as he seemed to struggle to figure out what to say. “Look, the last time we talked, things didn’t end very... well, to say the least.”

Folding his arms over his chest, Wilbur took a step back, his shoulder brushing against Jack’s. A small measure of relief washed over him at the reminder that his friend was here, and he forced himself to take another steadying breath.

“I presume that To-” he cut himself off, flinching when he went to say Tommy’s name. “I presume you were told about what happened?”

It was vague, but he knew Technoblade would know what he was talking about. It was easier than putting the reality into words. Keeping it vague meant he didn’t have to choose whether

to call his brother Tommy or Theseus in front of Technoblade. Because that choice would tell Technoblade far more about the situation than he wanted the man to know.

Technoblade raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I know what happened,” he said after another beat, deciding not to comment on Wilbur’s near slip-up. “You and your brother got into a pretty nasty fight.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Wilbur muttered, thinking that ‘nasty’ wasn’t an apt descriptor for what happened at all. It wasn’t *nasty* how Tommy cut his heart out with his words. It was so much more than nasty. It was cruel. It was blinding. It was like Wilbur’s entire world had ended right then and there.

A moment passed. Technoblade didn’t say anything in response to that, and silence choked the air once again.

Despite how badly Wilbur wanted to hold his ground and not give Technoblade any room between them, he found questions burning in the forefront of his mind. Because Technoblade was close with Tommy. Horribly close. That’s how he’d wormed his way into Tommy’s head in the first place. He had to know more than he was saying, and Wilbur wanted to know what Tommy had told him.

Wilbur had no idea what was happening with Tommy right now. He didn’t know if his final blow had cut his brother as deeply as he wanted it to, and he didn’t know if Tommy even cared that they were separated. The angry part of him wanted to imagine Tommy as this vindictive, cruel boy. Prince Theseus, who landed the final blow on Wilbur’s pillar that sent him crumbling beneath the waves, and didn’t care in the slightest that the two were staying in separate rooms now. Who probably was glad to be rid of his insufferable asshole of an older brother.

But that wasn’t Tommy. Wilbur knew that. He couldn’t even delude himself into thinking it, despite how upset he was. Tommy wasn’t vindictive or cruel. He was probably taking things just as hard as Wilbur was, but for the first time in his life, he couldn’t just go find him to see for himself how he was doing. His feet wouldn’t carry him out of the personal wing, because he was too scared of what he might find waiting for him outside those doors.

So that’s where Technoblade came in. A middleman Wilbur could use to gauge how Tommy was handling all of this. Because the ache in Wilbur’s chest demanded answers.

“How is he doing?” Wilbur whispered, eyes dropping to the floor.

“Tommy?” Technoblade asked. Wilbur nodded, and there was a pause.

One second passed.

Then another.

“Do you want my honest opinion?”

Wilbur nodded again, and tried to brace himself for whatever Technoblade was about to tell him.

“He’s angry,” Technoblade told him. “And I don’t mean angry in the way where he’s all puffed up and pissy and gets over it in a few hours. It’s more than that.”

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur tried not to let any hurt flash over his face. “I- I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. But I’d argue I have more of a right to be angry at him than he is at me.”

At this, Technoblade frowned. “Oh, I didn’t mean he was angry at you.”

Eyes going wide, Wilbur froze. “What?”

“Well, he *is* angry at you, but he’s also angry at just about everything from what I can tell,” Technoblade explained, folding his arms over his chest. “He nearly bit my head off when I went to check on him the night of your fight. And I’m pretty sure I heard him snappin’ at Ranboo earlier today too.”

Oh.

Wilbur knew what that was. When Tommy was upset—*really* upset—he’d bite any hand that came near him. He’d stew in his own frustration, refusing help from anyone around him until he ran out of steam. And in the past, Wilbur had found that in situations like those, Tommy wasn’t actually pissed at everyone else. When he was swallowed up by his own frustration like that, it was most often because he was angry at himself.

Was... Was that what Tommy was going through right now? Was he angry at himself, for what he said to Wilbur?

That could be it.

But then Wilbur heard *bastard* echo in his head again, and he found himself second-guessing himself as soon as that thought had formed. Because Tommy had wanted to hurt Wilbur. He could see it in his eyes. The blow was supposed to make Wilbur bleed, and now Wilbur’s hands felt as though they were soaked in his own blood. His words had landed. It was very possible Tommy didn’t regret what he’d said at all.

Once upon a time, Wilbur would’ve been able to say for sure which one it was. Because once upon a time, he knew Tommy better than Tommy knew himself. But that wasn’t true anymore. The boy who had called Wilbur a bastard didn’t look like his Tommy.

He didn’t know that boy. And that boy didn’t know him. So the answers he wanted were out of his reach.

“Are you gonna try talking to him anytime soon?” Technoblade then asked, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts.

Even if other answers were impossible for Wilbur to find, he knew the answer to that one without thinking.

“No,” he snapped, narrowing his eyes at the Emperor and daring him to argue.

Back on Eldingvegr, there wouldn’t have been a question about what Wilbur was supposed to do now. Eret would’ve pulled him aside, telling him in a gentle but firm voice that as the older one, it was his responsibility to apologize first. And there was no option where he could refuse.

Technoblade blinked. “Alright then. Up to you I suppose.”

Oh. That was... unexpected.

With that, Technoblade turned on his heel, and walked down the hall away from Wilbur and Jack. Wilbur stared at the pink braid that swung across his back, his brain short-circuiting as he tried to figure out what just happened.

There was no scolding. There was no reminder that he needed to be the bigger person. Just acceptance.

But then again, why did Wilbur expect Technoblade to scold him? It wasn’t like he had any real authority over his and Tommy’s interactions. An Emperor couldn’t order two foreign princes to get along with each other. This was between him and Tommy.

Technoblade turned a corner and disappeared from sight completely. And Wilbur found himself wondering if Tommy was going to ask Technoblade the same thing Wilbur asked him—how he was doing. If he did, what would Technoblade say? Would he describe him as being angry, like he described Tommy? Or did Technoblade see his tight voice and clenched jaw as signs of being distressed? Would Technoblade tell Tommy about the bags under his eyes? Or would he leave that part out?

Wilbur didn’t know. And that was almost to be expected at this point with Technoblade. Wilbur didn’t understand the Emperor in the slightest. Not his motives, not his questions—none of it.

After staring down the empty hallway for another few beats, Wilbur turned around and headed back towards his room. Jack followed him without a word.



Despite the anxiety twisting Wilbur’s gut with each passing minute, each passing hour, each passing *day* that he went without speaking to Tommy, he found that there was one thing overriding all his fear and grief and pain about their argument. One thing that dominated his mind, and settled over his shoulders with a near suffocating weight.

Boredom.

Wilbur was bored. The personal wing was much smaller than the main palace, and after his run-in with Technoblade, he was far less inclined to wander around it aimlessly. He considered going to speak to Phil to have something to do, but it wasn’t like he could just

bother Phil for no reason at all. He still had an Empire to run after all, and Wilbur didn't want to annoy him. Not when he'd already been so kind to Wilbur the past few days.

So Wilbur tried to ignore the boredom. He got a holo-pad of his own to read books on, and lingered in his room, pouring over texts from Elytra. And it helped, but it wasn't enough. There was still an itch under his skin. An ache clawing inside his chest, demanding he get up and do *something* so he could get it all to shut up.

There was a small voice in his head that kept wondering what Tommy was doing right now. If he was okay. If he was upset. If he was angry. If he was happy. Was he sleeping? Wilbur certainly wasn't.

Eventually, the voice grew louder. And louder. And louder. Until it was drowning out all hope of him focusing on his reading.

Wilbur needed to do something- anything to get out of his own head. Even just for an hour or two.

Which was how Wilbur found himself stepping outside of the personal wing with a pounding heart and anxiety bubbling away inside of him.

He didn't want to run into Tommy. That was something Wilbur was certain of. He wasn't sure if he could handle it yet, when the edges of his wounds were still so jagged and raw. If he saw Tommy... he really had no clue how he'd react, but he knew it wouldn't be pretty.

The doors hissed as they slid shut behind him. Jack was at his side, back straight and gaze fixed ahead, but Wilbur could tell there was a hint of worry in the lines of his forehead. And he couldn't blame Jack. After all, the last time he'd spoken to Tommy, it had ended with him having one of the worst panic attacks he'd ever had in his life.

For a moment, he debated turning tail and going back inside the personal wing. Fleeing from a threat that might not even be there.

But Wilbur forced himself to hold his ground. He wasn't *scared* of Tommy. It wasn't fair that he was confined to the personal wing while Tommy continued to have the rest of the palace to himself. Not when Tommy had used his tongue as a dagger. Not when Tommy had turned into a different person in front of Wilbur's very eyes.

"Come on, Jack," Wilbur said, wincing at how tight his voice was. "Let's go to the library."

Jack blinked before stumbling along down the hall, struggling to keep pace with Wilbur's longer legs. "Oh shit, uh, okay. You sure you want to go there though?"

Wilbur kept walking, but turned to raise an eyebrow at Jack. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I mean... it's close to your old room," Jack pointed out, brows furrowing.

The warning was clear. If they went to the library, there was a higher chance of them running into Tommy.



Wilbur forced his legs to keep moving.

“It’s fine,” Wilbur lied.

A beat.

“Okay then,” Jack then said, and kept walking beside him.

They made their way down the twisting halls of the palace, Wilbur trying not to feel like his skin was prickling under some invisible gaze. Every time they turned a corner, his heart skipped a beat. If they heard footsteps echoing behind them, his breathing hitched. And when a door opened right along the hall, with a familiar figure rushing out, Wilbur had to bite back a yelp.

At least until he realized who it was, and relief washed over him because it wasn’t *him*.

“Oh shit,” Quackity said, freezing halfway out of the room he was leaving. “Haven’t seen you in a while, Orpheus.”

Tension bled out of Wilbur’s shoulders as he took a breath to steady himself. It was just Quackity. Wilbur could handle talking to Quackity.

“Yeah, it’s been a while,” Wilbur agreed, trying not to wince when he realized that the last time they’d properly spoken was when he’d gotten drunk off his ass in Quackity’s room. “Uh, by the way, I’m sorry about all the...” He trailed off, making a vague hand gesture to refer to his night of weakness.

Quackity’s good eye lit up with understanding, and he nodded. “I get it, man. You definitely seemed to be going through some shit.” He paused, gaze flickering to Wilbur’s coat, before trailing back up to his face. “Honestly, you still kinda seem to be going through some shit.”

Wilbur huffed out a humorless laugh. “That’s one way to put it.”

Narrowing his eyes, Quackity fully stepped out into the hallway so he was face to face with Wilbur. “Y’know, I’m just taking a wild guess here, but does the reason you look like you’re two seconds away from passing out have anything to do with the fact that your little brother *also* looks like shit?”

...shit.

“He- He does?” Wilbur found himself asking, tripping over his own words. “When did you see him? Have you talked to him? What did-”

“Whoa, hey, one question at a time,” Quackity cut him off, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “In case you forgot, I didn’t really leave a great impression on Theseus after he saw me punch you that one time, so the two of us don’t really talk. But I saw him in the dining hall this morning when he was getting breakfast, and the kid looks just as exhausted as you do.”

Wilbur clenched his jaw. “But you didn’t talk to him?”

Quackity shook his head. “No. He had, uh, Ranboo, that kid Technoblade is mentoring with him. And also that flora who I always see hanging around him—the one with the beanie. He was mostly talking to those two.”

Ranboo and Aimsey. Of course. Wilbur wouldn’t be surprised if they were barely leaving Tommy’s side in the wake of all this.

“Something happened between you two,” Quackity said, completely blunt and to the point. There was no question there. It was just a statement of a fact.

“That’s none of your business,” Wilbur snapped without thinking.

Quackity raised an eyebrow, and it tugged on his scar. “Look, it’s not like I care about whatever drama you have going on with your kid brother. But you don’t get to pull the, ‘it’s not your business’ card when you spent several hours drunk off your ass going on and on about how you think you’re a shitty sibling and wished things were better between you two.”

Well, Quackity had a point there.

“I said I was sorry for that, alright?” Wilbur hissed, glaring at Quackity. “If you must know, yes, we got into a fight. Congrats on figuring that one out. You’re a real fucking genius, Quackity.”

“You can bitch at me all you want, Orpheus. I’m just asking a simple question,” Quackity snapped, scowling at him. “So is that why you’ve been totally off the radar the past few days? Because you’ve been hiding from Theseus?”

Wilbur winced. “I’ve been staying in another part of the palace.”

At this, Quackity hesitated. His scowl faded, and his good eye fell down to the embroidered stars trailing up Wilbur’s coat. He blinked a few times, as if he was turning over different possibilities in his mind. Wilbur had to resist the urge to squirm under his scrutiny.

“Where are you staying?” He asked after a minute, something cautious in his tone.

“The personal wing,” Wilbur told him, folding his arms over his chest. “The part of the palace where Phil and Techon take their meals and the like.”

And just like that, all the anger dissipated from Quackity’s face completely.

His good eye went wide and his eyebrows shot up to his hairline. He took a step back from Wilbur, looking him completely up and down as if he was just now seeing him for the first time. Along his arms, the tattooed feathers rustled, as if they were just as troubled as Quackity himself seemed to be.

“You... You’re staying in the personal wing? Like, you have your own room and everything?”

Wilbur frowned, wondering if he’d said something he shouldn’t have. “Yes, I do. It just makes things easier so I can avoid running into-” he hesitated, “you know.”

Quackity's eyebrows dropped, and he nodded slowly, something in his face making it clear that he didn't believe the last part of what Wilbur said at all.

"Uh, yeah, I guess that makes sense."

He paused, opening his mouth like he was going to say something else, but before he could get a word out there was a soft beeping coming from the golden earpiece that fanned around his ear.

"Shit, I gotta take this," Quackity muttered, frowning at the floor. "I'll see you around, Orpheus."

And before Wilbur could even muster out a goodbye, Quackity was turning on his heel and rushing off, tapping on his earpiece and greeting whoever was on the other end with a bellowing "*Hey man!*"

Wilbur watched as Quackity disappeared around the corner. There was something odd about what had just happened. Quackity's reaction to finding out where Wilbur was staying wasn't what he'd been expecting. Yes, there were some strange implications to letting a foreign prince stay in the Emperor's personal part of the palace. Whether they were related to the negotiations, or if it was related to that other possibility Wilbur wasn't exactly ready to think too deeply about, he knew the fact that he was staying in the personal wing meant *something* was going on.

But those were only things Wilbur himself knew about. An outsider like Quackity couldn't pick up on anything like that, right? How would he? It didn't make sense.

"Am I missing something here?" Wilbur asked Jack once Quackity's voice had faded down the hall. "Like, I know that staying in the personal wing is strange, but it's not *that* unusual, right?"

Jack tensed. "I mean... it's not exactly a common thing that happens here."

Frowning, Wilbur debated asking him to explain what he meant by that. But then again, Wilbur knew exactly what he meant. It wasn't normal for an Emperor to let a foreign prince stay in a personal wing. It wasn't normal for an Emperor to calm a foreign prince down from a panic attack. And it certainly wasn't normal for an Emperor to call a foreign prince by a nickname that his species usually reserved for their own children.

Suddenly, there was the sound of several voices coming down the hall. Wilbur tensed, unable to pick out if Tommy's voice was one of them. Jack seemed to notice this too, and grabbed Wilbur's wrist to drag him into the empty meeting room that Quackity had just walked out of.

The door went to slide shut behind them, but Wilbur held out a hand to stop it. Sensing the obstruction, the door stopped only a few inches from the edge of the doorframe. Then, Wilbur stepped back to make sure he was hidden next to the wall, and held a finger up to his lips so Jack knew to be quiet.

The voices out in the hall got louder. Wilbur's heart picked up speed.

“I just don’t get it, Ran. I thought Philza had at least a little bit more political tact than this!”

Aimsey. Wilbur immediately recognized their Floslium accent, and stiffened when they mentioned Phil’s name.

“I don’t really get it either if I’m being honest,” Ranboo replied, and Wilbur listened to their footsteps slow down near the door he and Jack were hiding behind. “Like, sure, I work with Techno a lot more than I work with Phil, but I still like to think I know Phil decently well. He’s a smart guy. I never thought he’d be the kind of guy to pull something this... unexpected.”

“Unexpected?” Aimsey snorted. “Ranboo, it’s blatant favoritism. He’s letting Wilbur stay in his *private* wing of the palace with his own room, while Tommy is still staying in a guest room. And you said he’s also letting Wilbur take meals with him, right?”

Wilbur jolted hearing Aimsey bring him up, and shared a wide-eyed look with Jack before focusing on the door again.

“That’s what Techno told me,” Ranboo confirmed. “But, like, in total fairness, from what I heard Orpheus didn’t ask to be put in the personal wing.”

“Well, duh. You can’t just ask for something like that!” Aimsey exclaimed. “But Philza still gave it to him. And again, he’s not stupid. There’s a statement being made with that. He’s keeping the Crown Prince to one of the wealthiest planets in the galaxy in a guest room, while giving a non-heir a room in his personal quarters.”

“I mean, it’s not really a secret that he and Orpheus talk a lot?” Ranboo offered, sounding unsure. “Also, you, uh, didn’t see how Tommy was doing until the next morning. But the fight was bad, Aimsey. Really bad. Like, I get why Techno and Phil might take extreme measures to keep the two of them apart.”

Wilbur’s breathing hitched. Jack shot him a worried look, which he purposefully ignored.

Aimsey was quiet for a beat.

“I offered to stay with him,” Aimsey then said, their voice much softer now. “When he said he was going to try and take a nap, I asked if it might be easier if he had someone else in the room, since he’s so used to Wil being with him. But I think I just pissed him off with that.”

Ranboo huffed at this. “Yeah, I’ve learned quite a few Eldingvegrian curse words over the past few days.”

“Oh yeah, he only breaks those out when he’s really angry,” Aimsey snorted. “Don’t take it personally though. He lashes out when he’s really upset, but he doesn’t mean it.”

“I figured,” Ranboo muttered. “I guess I’m just wondering what could’ve even happened to mess him up this badly. I know he and Orpheus have been arguing for a while now, but he won’t tell me anything about what actually happened during their fight.” He paused then, and Wilbur heard some shuffling footsteps, like Ranboo was shifting from side to side. “You’ve

known both of them a lot longer than I have. Did you ever see anything like this happen on Eldingvegr?”

“No, nothing close to it,” Aimsey told him. “Honestly, ever since they got here I’ve been wondering what happened, because they both act so differently from how I remember.”

Wilbur frowned at this, while Ranboo made a questioning noise. “How so?”

“Just in the way they interact with each other. It’s so cold. Like they can barely tolerate each other. But that’s not how they were on Eldingvegr. They were just... so much warmer. Constantly teasing each other or bickering, but not in a serious way, just a funny way. Or if Tommy was nervous or upset about something, he’d immediately grab Wilbur’s hand. Neither of them would say anything, but you could tell that it was always going to be the two of them and then everyone else.”

A lump formed in Wilbur’s throat hearing Aimsey talk about how he and Tommy used to be. He thought back to those days on Eldingvegr. When Aimsey would hide from their junior diplomat duties by running off with Tommy and Tubbo, and the three of them would find Wilbur and Niki and beg them to hide Aimsey from the other flora. And he remembered their group lounging in a sitting room, some political documentary playing on the wall that no one was paying attention to. Aimsey and Niki were chatting excitedly about something Wilbur couldn’t hear, Tubbo had fallen asleep on the other end of the couch, and Tommy was curled into his side, teasing him about how long his hair had gotten and flicking his forehead as he tried to convince him to cut it.

There was so much warmth in the memory. The pink sky outside their windows, Tommy’s small body pressed against his side, Tubbo’s soft snores, Niki’s bright smile, and Aimsey’s excited rambling.

It was such a contrast to the icy water that was drowning all of them now.

“I think Tommy’s been having nightmares,” Ranboo suddenly said, his voice low.

“What makes you say that?” Aimsey asked.

“Because last night I was walking by his room, and I heard someone shriek inside. It cut off really fast, and I almost knocked on the door to see if he was okay, but then...” he hesitated. “I- I heard him crying, I think.”

The ache in Wilbur’s chest was unbearable now. He grit his teeth, resting his forehead against the wall as he silently begged Aimsey and Ranboo to just fucking leave already.

“This is really hard on him,” Aimsey said softly. “And I don’t think Philza’s blatant favoritism to Wilbur is really helping anything. When he told me what Techno had told him about Wilbur staying in the personal wing, he definitely seemed upset about it.” A pause. “Does anyone else besides us know about this?”

“About Wilbur staying in the personal wing?” Ranboo asked. There was a beat of silence, which Wilbur figured was Aimsey nodding, because Ranboo continued with, “I don’t know.”

Obviously the servants all know along with the guards. And I don't think it's necessarily supposed to be a secret or anything."

"I have to go to a meeting with the other flora soon, so I'm just wondering if anyone's going to bring it up," Aimsey explained. "It's not really our business, but the others will wanna know how the state of the negotiations with Eldingvegr are going, since that directly affects our access to blaziphane."

"Are you gonna tell them?"

Another pause. "No, I don't think so. I don't really see a reason to."

Wilbur breathed out a silent sigh of relief. Although there wasn't much he could do about it if Phil or Technoblade decided to spread the news, he'd rather things be kept quiet for the time being. Even if it did affect the negotiations later on, right now, this wasn't anyone else's business but theirs.

"I should probably start walking over to the meeting," Aimsey said after a minute of silence.

"Oh, okay. Do you want me to walk you over there?" Ranboo offered.

"Sure, Ran," Aimsey agreed, and Wilbur could hear the smile in their voice. "Let's go."

With that, their footsteps began to fade, and the roar in Wilbur's ears died down with it.

Once they were gone, Wilbur found his chest aching with a newfound guilt. Tommy was upset. He'd known he was angry, but he was having *nightmares*. He was sure they had to do with their escape from Eldingvegr, because Wilbur had been having similar nightmares the past few nights. He hadn't woken up shrieking yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

When he was sure that Aimsey and Ranboo were far away, he rushed out of the unused meeting room, with Jack trailing right behind him. He took a few deep breaths, wincing as the cold air scraped against his throat. Leaning his forehead against the wall, Wilbur tried to count the waves in his mind, but there was no order to how they crashed.

The fact that he was staying in the personal wing was upsetting Tommy. That shouldn't be surprising, but Wilbur had been so distracted thinking of all the other things going on between the two of them that he hadn't even considered that as a possibility.

Not to mention, the judgement in Aimsey and Ranboo's voices wasn't lost on him. Phil was making a statement by allowing Wilbur his own private room in the personal wing, while Tommy had to remain in a standard guest room. It was something the others were taking note of. It held meaning to it, and he couldn't help but wonder how the other leaders would look at him now if they were still here.

Would they still see him as the bastard older brother of a Crown Prince? Would they see him as a failed advisor? Or would they see him as... as an extension of Phil? As something Phil had put a stake in?

Implications. They swirled around Wilbur's head like fog, and he wondered how long it was going to take before he got lost in them.

Shit. He needed to ask Phil about this.

"Let's go back," Wilbur told Jack, his words rough as he turned down the hallway back towards the personal wing.

Jack made a surprised noise, and rushed to keep up with him. "Wh- I mean, yeah, that's fine. But are you-"

Pausing midstep, Wilbur turned to meet Jack's eyes, waiting for him to ask. Because the answer was obvious. *Are you okay?* No, Wilbur hadn't been okay in days. They both knew that.

Seeming to realize this, Jack shut his mouth. He stared at Wilbur for a moment, before nodded and taking the lead. And with a huff, Wilbur followed.

They made it back to the personal wing without any more run-ins. As soon as the large doors had hissed shut behind them, Wilbur beelined down the familiar route to Phil's office, not even bothering to ask Jack if he was in there.

His footsteps echoed off the walls, and in his mind he heard Aimsey's words play on loop.

*"It's blatant favoritism."*

*"He definitely seemed upset about it."*

Even though Wilbur hadn't asked to stay in the personal wing, he couldn't help but feel like he was being blamed for it nonetheless. At least by Aimsey and Ranboo. But given how strange Quackity's reaction was to the whole thing, it was likely they weren't the only ones thinking that way.

He reached Phil's door. Somehow, even when he wasn't sure what kind of answers he was looking for, he found himself seeking out the Emperor anyway.

Taking a breath, Wilbur lifted his hand and knocked on the door.

One beat passed.

Then, the door slid open, and Wilbur met Phil's eyes through the doorway. He was sitting behind his desk, hunched over and feathers brushing the ground. When he saw Wilbur though, he straightened up immediately.

"Orpheus?"

"Phil," Wilbur greeted, dipping his head. "Do you, uh, have a minute? I know this is kind of sudden, but I just-" he hesitated, struggling to figure out the best way to phrase this. "I have a question for you, if that's alright?"

For a moment, Phil was silent. Wilbur's heart began to race, and he wondered what the fuck he was doing. This conversation easily could've happened later. Since they were taking meals together, it would've been more appropriate to wait until dinner to ask him about this whole thing. And yet, Wilbur had found himself rushing to Phil's office the second that guilty ache made itself known. Like he knew the only way to quiet the waves crashing above his head was to find Phil, because somehow, Phil always seemed to know exactly what to say to soothe the waters of his mind.

"Of course that's alright," Phil said after his pause, straightening up in his seat and gesturing for Wilbur to come inside. "Come, take a seat."

He gave Jack a small nod, and Jack nodded back as he settled himself outside the door. Then, Wilbur stepped into the office, and the door slid shut behind him with a soft *whoosh*.

Somehow, Phil's office was even messier than it had been the last time Wilbur had seen it. Or, well, the last time he remembered getting a good look at it. When he was in the office a few days prior, he hadn't exactly been paying attention to how it looked. He was a bit too focused on... everything else.

His eyes skimmed over the part of the wall he'd punched during his breakdown. The stone itself was unmarked, but his wrapped hand throbbed with a phantom ache.

Phil's desk was absolutely covered in stacks of papers and random knick knacks. He averted his eyes from the words on the pages, not wanting to accidentally read anything he wasn't supposed to. But Phil didn't seem worried about him seeing something he shouldn't. Instead, he'd leaned back in his seat, brushing his hair back from his face and stretching his wings out behind him with a quiet groan.

Wilbur stared at the chair that sat on the other side of Phil's desk. It felt... odd, to sit down across a desk from him now. As if this was some kind of formal meeting, when Wilbur just wanted to ask him a simple question.

He glanced between the chair, the desk, and Phil's chair. His brows furrowed.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Wilbur grabbed the chair that sat on the other side of the desk, and dragged it around so it was only a few feet from Phil's own chair. Phil raised his eyebrows in surprise, but didn't say anything as Wilbur sat down, heart pounding out of his chest.

A moment of silence passed. He waited for Phil to comment on his choice of seat.

He didn't.

"What's going on, mate?" Phil asked instead, turning to face him like there was nothing unusual about this whole situation.

Wilbur opened his mouth, trying to figure out how to put his racing thoughts into words. The guilt hadn't lessened since he'd stepped inside the office, and the fact that Phil hadn't said a single thing to Wilbur moving his chair next to his actually made it worse. Because it was a



reminder that what Aimsey said wasn't wrong at all. Phil was favoring him. He was favoring him, and it was hurting Tommy as a result.

And Wilbur wished he could just say he didn't care. Because Tommy had hurt him, so he shouldn't care about hurting him back. But he couldn't stop. Worrying about Tommy was something he'd done nonstop for the past fifteen years. It wasn't something he could just shut off.

"You're playing favorites," Wilbur finally said after nearly two minutes of silence. "Between me and- and him. You're playing favorites and people are noticing."

Phil blinked. "I'm playing favorites with you and Theseus?"

Wilbur nodded. Phil considered this for a moment, before humming.

"I suppose you could say I am."

"Wh- That's it?" Wilbur asked, frowning at him. "You're not going to try and deny it?"

"Orpheus, it's not exactly a secret that I'm closer with you than I am with your brother. Especially since you and I have talked far more than I have with him," Phil said, seeming confused by Wilbur's reaction. "It's not like I'm purposefully trying to snub Theseus by granting you a room in this part of the palace and not him, but I'm not going to pretend like I would've given him the same room had I run into him first after your fight instead of you."

"But he's the Crown Prince! Don't you see what kind of statement you're making with this?" Wilbur asked, his voice rising in volume. "Others are noticing, Phil. I overheard Ranboo and Aimsey talking about it, and they both don't understand why you're showing me, a non-heir, such blatant favoritism."

Leaning further back in his seat, Phil turned it over in his mind, tapping his talons against the arm of his chair.

"Okay."

...huh?

"Okay? That's it?" Wilbur pushed. "You're not worried?"

"Why would I be worried?" Phil asked, raising an eyebrow. "I know my people, and this isn't something they're going to lose their heads over. Sure, it might get me a few raised eyebrows, but frankly I don't give a shit what the others think."

Dragging his hands down his face, Wilbur bit back the urge to ask about the negotiations. Because a part of him knew Phil was right. He didn't have to worry about his own people's judgement for showing favoritism to the non-heir of a foreign planet. But he did have to worry about Tommy's thoughts on the matter. Because Tommy was the one in charge of the negotiations, and pissing him off wasn't exactly in his best interest.

But isn't that what Wilbur wanted? He wanted to keep Eldingvegr from falling under Antarctic control. His entire fight with Tommy was sparked by the fact that he was talking to Technoblade about joining the Empire. It... It was a good thing for Tommy to be upset with Phil in this situation, right?

Wilbur didn't know anymore. His thoughts were spinning again, and his head was throbbing something fierce. He was a mess of conflicted thoughts and feelings—he didn't want to think about this right now. Not about the fact that he felt like he was standing at the bottom of an avalanche, watching the torrential downpour of ice approach with no way to escape.

He took a shuddering breath and hunched over. Suddenly, there was a hand on his shoulder, and he found himself leaning closer to the singular source of warmth in the icy room.

"You get so stressed so easily sometimes," Phil teased, rubbing small circles into his shoulderblade with his thumb. "If you had wings, I bet your feathers would be ruffled all the time, little bird."

Oh.

"You think so?" Wilbur asked, keeping his eyes shut as the ache in his chest began to fade.

"I do," Phil hummed, moving his hand to the back of Wilbur's neck.

Wilbur took another deep breath, letting Phil's words settle the waves in his head like dropping oil onto troubled seas.

"What would they be like?" Wilbur then asked, his voice low. "If I had wings- what do you think they'd be like?"

He wasn't sure where the question came from. It slipped out without his permission, but it was the only thing he could think of right now as Phil continued to rub small circles onto the back of his neck.

For a moment, Phil didn't respond. Wilbur's eyes fluttered open, and he saw that the man's brows were furrowed as he stared at the wall above his head.

Then,

"You'd be the type of Elytrian to have very expressive wings I think," Phil began, not meeting Wilbur's eyes. "I don't mean this as an insult, but you're not the best at keeping a poker face. Your wings would only make it worse. If you were upset, they'd bristle immediately. Or if you were pissed off, they'd puff up, even if you tucked them close to your back to try and hide it."

Wilbur tried to imagine it. Tried to imagine having wings that could span the length of an entire room. Feathers that would betray his feelings just as easily as his face. He wondered what color they'd be. Although Phil was the only Elytrian he'd seen, he knew Avian plumage varied widely. And since Avians were descendants of Elytrians, it only made sense they had far more feather colors than just the pitch black that Phil's were.

“I suppose it’s probably better this way,” Wilbur huffed. “You said it yourself, I already have a hard enough time hiding my emotions on my face. Adding wings would make me an open book to anyone who looked at me.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that. You’re still young, little bird. You’ll get better at that sort of thing with time.”

Blinking, Wilbur glanced up again, and found himself meeting Phil’s eyes.

“And if I had wings? Would I learn how to control those with time as well?”

For the briefest moment, Wilbur could’ve sworn he saw a smile flash over Phil’s face.

“You would. Because I’d teach you how.”

There was a pause.

Phil blinked. The warmth on his face faded, and he pulled his hand away, feathers rustling as he tucked his wings into his back. Wilbur frowned at the sudden loss of contact, straightening up in his seat as Phil turned his head away, looking back down at the papers on his desk.

“Um, I’m sorry, Orpheus, but if that’s all you need for now I do have some work I need to get back to,” Phil then said, his voice strangely tight.

“Oh.”

Shit. Yeah. Wilbur had just barged into his office without any warning this time.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt-”

“No, you don’t need to apologize,” Phil reassured him, glancing up as Wilbur pushed out of his chair. “You did nothing wrong.”

Wilbur nodded, deciding to trust that Phil wasn’t bullshitting him. Because a lot of their conversations had been built on the idea that Phil was more honest with Orpheus than others would be. If Phil didn’t want him in here, he could’ve turned him away at the door.

Still, it was odd how suddenly he was being rushed out. Almost like a switch had been flipped.

“I’ll see you at dinner then, I suppose?” Wilbur asked, hovering in the doorway.

“I might take my dinner in here. I just have a lot of paperwork to catch up on,” Phil said, head tilted down again.

For some reason, there was a stab of disappointment in Wilbur’s chest hearing that.

“Okay. Goodnight then, Phil.”

With a final wave, Wilbur left the room before Phil could say his own goodbye. The pain in his chest was still there, but it had been soothed by Phil's comforting words. Despite their rushed goodbye, he could still feel the warmth left from Phil's hand on the back of his neck, almost like a brand. It was both comforting and not at the same time.

Back in the hallway, Jack jumped to attention. He raised an eyebrow in silent question, and Wilbur gave him a small nod. A reassurance that he was alright.

Outside the windows that lined the halls, the capital city of Zephyr IV glittered in the light of the blue and white ice that surrounded it. His eyes trailed along the carved metal buildings and the high-tech trains that flew between them like birds. His back twinged, and he thought again about the way Phil spoke about the wings he would have if he were an Elytrian. How they would reflect his emotions as openly as his face did. It was certainly a good thing he didn't have wings for that reason alone, but at the same time, Wilbur found himself eyeing the arched ceiling of the ice cavern outside, and wondered what it would be like to fly up to it.

So caught up in his own thoughts, Wilbur was barely paying attention to his surroundings as they made their way back to his room. They passed by the training room, and Wilbur would've walked by it without a second glance if the doors hadn't opened the second they passed by.

He startled at the loud *hiss*, freezing midstep. A figure hurried out of the training room, towel slung over his shoulders and sweat dripping from his forehead.

A rock dropped into Wilbur's gut when he locked eyes with Tommy for the first time since their fight.

The second Tommy saw him, he stopped walking. His face was unreadable, but Wilbur didn't miss the way his eyes darted over Wilbur's new coat, before lingering on his bandaged hand.

The last time Wilbur had seen those eyes, they were sparking with icy flames—until they weren't. Until they were ice cold and completely unfamiliar as he hissed out an insult Wilbur had never thought he'd hear from his brother's mouth.

This time, Wilbur didn't stop long enough to see if the ice was still there. Because he couldn't let himself linger for that long. Seeing Tommy was enough to knock the wind out of his chest, and his body went into autopilot as his etiquette training took over once again.

There was an iron band wrapping around his chest as he straightened his shoulders, keeping his head held high as he turned on his heel and walked back towards his room. His legs were stiff, and he couldn't hear a single thing around him because of the deafening waves in his head. But he kept walking.

And walking.

And walking.

All while ignoring the stare burning holes into the back of his head.

Right before he turned the corner though, he risked a glance back. To see if Tommy was still watching him from the front of the training room.

To Wilbur's surprise, Tommy was nowhere to be seen.

So when the door to his room shut behind him, he was alone once again.

## Chapter End Notes

ohohohoho phil's actions have consequences :) but phil doesn't really give a shit  
soooooo

hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!! I'm going to try and get the next one up asap, because at the very beginning of december I'm going to be out of town for about 10 days so that's gonna be 10 days where I probably won't be writing much oops. Hopefully I can at least get the next chapter of this up before then, but we'll have to wait and see. keep an eye out for it!

ok my mom wants me to help unload some groceries rn so I gotta go. please let me know what you thought of the chapter down in the comments! they seriously make my day <3

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE> (they also got a sneak peek at this chapter a few days ago)

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)!

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees ! since twitter is kind of going to shit, my tumblr is especially active as of late. I answer lots of asks about stars on there, so make sure to check it out if you want any behind the scenes thoughts or worldbuilding tidbits from me about the story!

# a desire to trust is not trust

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur finds himself in a new kind of purgatory.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone guess what! new chapter!

so as you can tell I am definitely putting full force into writing these as fast as I can. hopefully I'll be able to get another chapter out before I leave for my trip next week, but we'll have to see how things go. but as always, thank you all so much for the love you gave the last chapter. we are at a very complicated point in the story, so it's really fun for me to see your thoughts and discussion in the comments

anyway! I won't ramble much longer! hope you guys enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It didn't take long for Wilbur to develop a new routine.

In the mornings he would take his breakfast in the dining room, and almost every morning Phil would be there as well. Sometimes, they'd spend the morning chatting about random things—like the latest book Wilbur had been reading, or the kinds of food they had available on Zephys IV this time of year (it turned out, nearly everything they ate had to be imported onto the planet, so their options were somewhat limited). Other times, if Wilbur woke up with that unbearable ache in his chest making itself more known than ever, he would simply stay quiet. And Phil was getting better at picking up on those days when Wilbur wasn't ready to talk in the morning, so once he figured out what was going on, he would either let them eat in silence without complaint, or he would fill the air between them by reading from some old Elytrian text he already had loaded onto his holo-pad.

After breakfast, Phil would disappear to do his work, leaving Wilbur to fill his day however he pleased. Usually, this consisted of him wandering around the personal wing for an hour or so before going back to his room to read as a way to pass the time. He started inviting Jack into his room after a certain point, and the two would go back and forth trading stories—albeit with Jack sharing far more stories from his time as a guard instead of Wilbur talking about his life on Eldingvegr.

Sometimes, Wilbur took the risk and left the personal wing to wander around the main part of the palace. Jack would walk ahead of him, looking around corners and listening intently for any familiar voices echoing down the hall. Thankfully, there were no more unexpected run-ins, although he and Jack were careful to not linger by the training room if they could help it.

Wilbur did bump into Technoblade a few times in the personal wing. They always kept their conversations short and cordial. When it came to dinner, Wilbur would always have Jack ask the guards who exactly was in the dining room before they walked over. If Technoblade was sharing a meal with Phil, then Wilbur would just ask to take his dinner in his room.

Maybe it was cowardly to avoid even eating a meal with the Emperor, but it was difficult for him to look at Technoblade and not think of Tommy. In total fairness though, nearly everything reminded him of Tommy these days. Still, he had no desire to put himself through a painfully awkward meal if he didn't have to, so he continued to avoid the Emperor all the same.

Days passed like this. The routine was... calming.

That's what he told himself when he woke up in the middle of the night with a sharp gasp, adrenaline coursing through his limbs as the crawlspace in the playroom flashed behind his eyes.

That's what he told himself when he wandered through the halls with exhaustion weighing down his bones, Tommy's Voice echoing through his ears after he commanded the Essempi soldiers to remove Wilbur's gag.

That's what he told himself when he heard explosions flashing in his memories, watching the sylfrwood trees burn as he and Tommy ran through the halls of the palace they'd grown up in.

The nightmares were getting worse. When Wilbur woke up in the dead of night, body seized with fear as he heard Dream tell Eret his intentions to kill both him and Tommy, he always threw a hand out to his left, searching the other side of the bed for the other body that should've been there.

When his hand was only met with empty air, another jolt of fear would run through him. Then, he'd have to count his breaths while reminding himself that Tommy was staying in his own room now. He was safe. They both were. He just wasn't with Wilbur.

It was easier said than done.

More often than not, if Wilbur woke from a nightmare, he wasn't able to fall back asleep at all. He'd spend those nights staring at the glittering canopy above his head, sleep-muddled thoughts blurring between past and present.

*It was cold.*

*That was the only thing Wilbur could think of as he wandered the palace halls, the marble floor stinging against his bare feet. Outside the windows, Wilbur could see dusty pink sky*

*stretching out for miles on end, while the sylfrwood trees swayed in the faint breeze.*

*The scream of metal ripping off of metal echoed in his ears. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block it out. But the sound was in his head and not outside. There was no blocking it out.*

*Half-asleep, Wilbur didn't think about where he was going. He just let his feet carry him through the palace, heart pounding in his chest and cheeks sticky with dried tears.*

*Soon, he found himself outside a familiar door. One he hadn't meant to go to, but his subconscious had led him to anyway. He wasn't sure why he was here. It wasn't like there was anything she could do to help him. Nights like these were always sleepless. It was a familiar routine to Wilbur at this point.*

*He shouldn't wake her up. He'd only known Niki for a few months, and even though he already considered her his favorite person in the palace besides Tommy, he didn't want to bug her if she was sleeping.*

*Wilbur turned to walk away, but couldn't bring himself to. He needed to talk to someone. To get out of his own head so he'd stop hearing that screeching metal. But it was already hard enough to get Tommy down to sleep, and despite how much he loved to talk, at four years old half of what he said was gibberish anyway, so it wasn't like he'd be very helpful right now.*

*Niki was nice. One of the nicest people he'd ever met. Maybe... maybe she wouldn't be mad if he woke her up. Just this once.*

*Taking a shaky breath, Wilbur held up a hand and knocked on her door.*

*Silence followed. Wilbur waited, shifting from foot to foot as the cold marble continued to sting the bottom of his feet.*

*Then,*

*"Hello?" Niki mumbled as the door slid open.*

*She'd clearly been asleep. Her pink hair was frizzy, and her eyes were half-shut as she held onto the doorway like she was going to fall over.*

*"Oh, I'm sorry, you were-" Wilbur winced, guilt surging through him when he saw how tired she obviously was. "Never mind, I'll go-"*

*"Wilbur?" Niki blinked, her eyes opening wider. "Is it morning already?"*

*Wilbur shook his head. "No, it's not."*

*Niki brows furrowed. "Is something wrong?"*

*Taking a step back, he shook his head again. "It's stupid. I didn't- sorry, you can go back to sleep."*



*Unfortunately, Wilbur's words seemed to have the opposite effect. Niki's eyes widened further, and the haze of sleep dissipated as she looked him up and down, before her gaze settled back on his face.*

*"Are you okay?"*

*And Wilbur hesitated. Because Niki didn't seem mad. She didn't even look annoyed.*

*When Wilbur was silent, something like realization washed over Niki's face.*

*"Can you not sleep?"*

*"It- It's kind of stupid," Wilbur said, brushing his hair out of his face. "I just had a bad dream and usually I can go back to sleep but tonight I couldn't and I was just- I was walking around and-"*

*Wilbur was cut off by Niki reaching out and wrapping her hand around his wrist. Then, before he could ask what she was doing, he was being dragged into her room with the door swinging shut behind him.*

*Darkness enveloped the room as soon as the light from the hall disappeared. The walls were dotted with silver and blue from both their freckles, and Wilbur watched the glowing dots move between the shadows as Niki dragged him to her bed.*

*"I can help you if you want," Niki explained as she let go of his wrist to crawl under the blankets, scooting over to make room for him beside her. "But you can't tell anyone if I do. I could get in a lot of trouble for it with the Ambassadors."*

*Wilbur frowned as he settled himself under the blankets, turning on his side so he could face her. "How?"*

*Niki's eyes glowed a soft shade of silver, and thanks to the light from his own freckles, he could just barely make out her smile. "I'm not very good at it yet, but when I was little, if I couldn't sleep then my mum would use her Voice to help me."*

*Oh.*

*"You can use your Voice?" Wilbur whispered, his eyes blown wide.*

*It had been ages since he'd heard a siren use her Voice. He could remember the way his mother's Voice echoed off the walls when she'd tell him to breathe if he was hyperventilating like he did when he cried too much. How the command was gentle, but would thrum through his bones all the same and he would finally be able to take a full breath for the first time in minutes.*

*He thought back to lessons whispered in the dark. His mother telling him what pitch to use, how to push the Voice out from his throat and give power to the words he put in the air. She always reminded him that only a few people could know she was teaching him those things. How people would get mad if they found out she wanted him to use his Voice like she did hers.*

*"I only started lessons recently," Niki confessed. "So it probably won't be more than a suggestion, but it might help you sleep if you want."*

*Although Wilbur's eyes burnt when he thought of his mum, he was also exhausted and wanted to sleep. If Niki could use her Voice to silence the screeching metal echoing in his head... he needed that. Desperately.*

*"Please," Wilbur whispered. "I keep hearing it in my head and- and it hurts, Niki. It hurts my head and it hurts my chest."*

*Niki frowned, clearly confused as to what he was talking about. But instead of asking about it, after a moment her frown cleared, and she nodded.*

*"Okay, I'll see what I can do." She shut her eyes, her breathing steady as the seconds passed. Wilbur wondered if she was doing the same exercises his mum taught him. Counting the waves until they calmed.*

*A few moments passed. Then, Niki's eyes opened again.*

*"Go to sleep," she whispered.*

*There was no echo in her words, and disappointment flashed through Wilbur when he didn't feel any compulsion to do what she said.*

*Embarrassment flashed over Niki's face at her failure. "I told you I wasn't very good at it."*

*Oh no. He didn't want to make her feel bad when she was trying to help him!*

*"It's okay! It's really hard to do that stuff," Wilbur reassured her. "If you can't do it that's okay. I'll be fine."*

*Niki furrowed her brows and shook her head. "No, I'm gonna do it. Just give me a second."*

*She paused again, and this time there was nearly a minute of silence as she ran through the breathing exercises in her head. Wilbur waited.*

*Then,*

*"Go to sleep."*

*Although it was nowhere near as loud or echoey as his mother's Voice had been, there was a soft echo to Niki's words as the command thrummed through Wilbur's bones. What Niki had said was true. It was more of a suggestion than a command. Wilbur's heartbeat began to slow, and he felt his eyes grow heavy, but if he wanted he could fight it off.*

*He didn't want to though. Instead, he leaned into the suggestion, letting it fill up his mind as Niki's Voice tugged at the darkness edging his mind.*

*"Thank you, Niki," Wilbur whispered, the screeching metal finally going silent as he let his eyes slip shut.*

*There was the sound of shifting as Niki resettled herself beside him. “You’re welcome, Wil. Sleep well.”*

*“You too.”*

Niki wasn't around to help him fall asleep anymore. She wasn't around at all, and neither was Tommy. It was only him in his room, and his resulting exhaustion was choking him.

He hated the routine he was stuck in. While there was nothing wrong with it, it felt like he was suspended in purgatory. Waiting for something to happen. Something to jolt him into action. Something to appear that he could *strive* for. A goal. He was wandering the hallways with no direction in mind, but that was what he desperately needed more than anything. A guide telling him where to go now. A map showing him what his new destination needed to be.

Wilbur really needed to learn to be careful what he wished for.

Nearly a week since he'd seen Tommy outside the training room, Wilbur's usual wandering hours were interrupted by Jack grabbing his earpiece with a deep frown.

“Uh, yes?” He asked, his voice cutting through the silence Wilbur had been suffocating in. Wilbur paused his steps, waiting for Jack to speak to whoever was on the other end.

“Really?” Jack then asked, frown deepening. “Right now?” A pause. “Fuck, okay, I'll get him over there right now.”

With that, Jack let go of the earpiece and straightened up, something grim settling over his face as he met Wilbur's eyes again.

“You've been summoned to the conference room.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

The conference room, also known as the negotiations room. The room he hadn't set foot in for ages now, because the negotiations with Phil and Technoblade had been put on hold.

Wilbur was being summoned there. Not an invitation, an *order*.

“Shit,” Wilbur breathed, a rock dropping into his gut. “Do you know what it's about?”

Jack shook his head. “No, wouldn't tell me shit. Just said you were being summoned immediately.”

That-

That could mean a lot of things. Maybe Phil just wanted to talk to him again, but then that begged the question of why he was in the negotiations room. It's possible he could've already been in there discussing negotiations with some leaders over a call, and simply didn't want to

leave. Maybe whatever he wanted to talk to Wilbur about had nothing to do with negotiations of any kind. Maybe he was just-

No. Wilbur couldn't lie to himself like that. There was something going on, and he wasn't going to find out what it was until he stepped into that room.

Swallowing the dread crawling up his throat, Wilbur nodded at Jack, and Jack led him out of the personal wing. He kept his head down as they walked to the negotiations room, jumping at any sudden sound out of fear that he might turn a corner and run directly into Tommy. His heart was already pounding a mile a minute in his chest. Running into him was the last thing he needed right now.

The walk to the negotiations room was far too short for Wilbur's liking. Nausea was twisting his stomach, and the waves were echoing in his mind as he fought to take deep breaths. When they came face to face with the other guards standing near the door, Jack flashed Wilbur a sympathetic look, before being forced to step back.

Wilbur stared at the smooth metal door, trying to shove down the buzzing in his chest. There was no sense in panicking before he even knew what he was here for. Unfortunately, his anxiety didn't really listen to that logic, but he reminded himself of it anyway.

Curling his hands into fists at his sides, Wilbur nodded at one of the guards, and stepped through the doors as soon as they'd hissed open.

As suspected, Phil was in the negotiations room. He sat furthest from the door, his wings tucked behind his back and circlet resting perfectly on top of his head. When his eyes met Wilbur's, he didn't smile, and instead let his gaze flicker over to another occupied chair in the room.

Wilbur followed Phil's gaze, and had to suppress the urge to flinch the second he saw who it was.

Tommy looked just as alarmed as Wilbur was. His eyes were blown wide. His mouth was set in a thin line. When their gazes locked, Tommy blinked, like he had to force himself not to look away.

And it was only then that Wilbur noticed the last person at the table. Technoblade was seated directly opposite of Phil. Unlike Phil, whose gaze was nervously darting between Wilbur and Tommy, Technoblade was staring at one thing and one thing only: Wilbur.

It was like Wilbur had been punched in the face. His eyes stung, and his heart was pounding so loudly, he could barely hear anything above it. The waves had turned tumultuous once more, and Wilbur watched them crash and rumble above his head, not missing how his lungs were starting to ache for air.

"Wh- What is this?" Wilbur choked out, forcing his eyes back over to Phil.

"C'mon Orpheus, you know what this is," Technoblade replied instead, looking the most relaxed out of everyone at the table. "It's been too long. We need to reopen the negotiations."

No.

No no no no- this was too fast. Wilbur hadn't been prepared for this. Fuck, he hadn't even been thinking about when the negotiations were going to start again. He was stupid. So unbelievably stupid.

His gaze flickered to Tommy again. His shoulders were hunched, and there was a crease between his brows as he looked down at the table. He was tense. That much was obvious. But there was something else there too. A twist to his mouth, the way his jaw was set—he was annoyed.

Tommy was annoyed right now, and Wilbur didn't know if it was at the situation, or personally at him. Had he asked for Wilbur to be here? Or had Phil and Technoblade insisted he be summoned as well? Wilbur doubted it was the former, given how Tommy could barely even stand to look at him. So if it was the latter...

His thoughts were spinning with unbridled panic. The waves were roaring in his ears, and his legs were turning to jello beneath him. He thought back to the last time he'd heard Tommy's voice. The icy rage sitting behind his words. And then he thought of his own response. Falling back into the one thing he knew how to do.

"I... I was under the impression that Prince Theseus didn't need my advice anymore," Wilbur forced out, his word as flat as could be as he slipped into court speak. Unlike all the times he'd gone to say Tommy's name before and stopped himself, this time there was no hesitation when he said Tommy's title. When he fell back on his etiquette training, it made it so much easier to fall into using Tommy's formal name and title as well. It's what he was supposed to do in a situation like this after all.

Wilbur couldn't deny the flicker of satisfaction saying Tommy's formal name brought him though. The way Tommy flinched at it, like Wilbur had slapped him across the face. The past week apart from Tommy had subdued his anger, but the waves were starting to build once more. He could hear Tommy's insult echoing in his ears, and Wilbur found it all too easy to indulge in his own pettiness in return.

Meanwhile, Phil and Technoblade both frowned at Wilbur's words.

"Are you saying you don't wish to act as his advisor?" Phil asked, wings rustling.

"I never said that," Wilbur shot back, now not daring to look away from Tommy. "Prince Theseus has just made it clear to me he doesn't need my input on negotiations, so I don't."

"Oh shut the fuck up!" Tommy suddenly shouted, cutting Wilbur off.

His face was twisted into a scowl now, and his shoulders were shaking as he straightened up in his chair. A million emotions flashed across his face as he met Wilbur's eyes, and once again, Wilbur was struck with the realization that he didn't have the slightest clue what Tommy was thinking.

“I don’t understand,” Wilbur said, surprised at how calm he sounded despite the maelstrom raging inside him. “I thought you didn’t want my advice-” a beat of hesitation, “Your Highness.”

It was a cruel barb to throw into a genuine sentence, but Wilbur couldn’t hold himself back. And of course, it had exactly the intended effect. Tommy’s scowl deepened, the icy fire in his eyes sparking again.

“First off, don’t call me that. Second off, I didn’t ask for you to be here. They did,” he hissed, pointing between Phil and Technoblade.

This time, it was Wilbur’s turn to flinch. Because he’d figured Tommy likely hadn’t wanted him to come to this kind of a meeting, but the confirmation was another stab to his chest nonetheless.

“Fine,” Wilbur snapped back, glancing over at Phil. “Can I leave then? As you can see, His Highness doesn’t want me to act as his advisor.”

“I just fucking said not to call me-”

“Theseus,” Phil said, his voice surprisingly low as he cut Tommy off, “I understand you don’t want Orpheus acting as your advisor, but right now he is the only person from Eldingvegr on the entire planet. Intergalactic law requires that you must have the option of an advisor with you to discuss formal negotiations, and if you’re a minor, they must remain present even if you opt out. Of course you don’t have to listen to what he says, but Orpheus needs to remain here.” Then, Phil looked over at Wilbur. “I’m sure you’re aware of that rule as well, Orpheus..”

It was both a reminder, and a light scolding Phil knew only Wilbur would understand. Of course he knew that Tommy needed an advisor for negotiations. But he’d gone and asked if he could leave because frankly, he didn’t want to be here for this. He had no desire to listen to Tommy sign away their home planet out of... spite, or whatever it was that was twisting his face right now. Even from across the room, Wilbur could feel sparks of anger bouncing off of Tommy. He had no desire to let himself get burnt again. Not when the gaping hole in his chest was still dripping blood onto the stone floor below.

But he didn’t have a choice. He had to stay here, even though it was already getting difficult for him to breathe.

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur forced himself to walk over to Phil’s side of the table. He sat as far from Tommy as he could, trying not to squirm under Tommy’s scrutiny as he glanced between Wilbur and Phil.

“Alright, now that that’s settled,” Technoblade cut in, resting his elbows on the table in front of him, “let’s stop wasting time and get started. Theseus, we’ve been talking about this a little bit on our own, so what are your thoughts now about Eldingvegr joining the Empire?”

Despite his cold demeanor, Wilbur was panicking on the inside. He had no idea what Tommy was going to say. Because the last time they’d spoken about this, Tommy had wanted to join

the Empire. He'd made it clear he didn't see any other options, and Wilbur had fought against that. Technically speaking, Tommy could sign the papers right here and now. Everything he'd been fighting for could be turned to dust in two seconds flat, and while Wilbur understood the logic of why Tommy was pushing for this, the idea of losing Eldingvegr was sending him into a spiral.

Tommy hesitated before responding.

"I'm, uh, still thinking things over," he admitted, eyes flickering over to Wilbur for half a second before focusing on the table again. "This isn't me, like, signing anything, got it? I'm just open to talking about how things might work if we were gonna do this."

"And that's perfectly reasonable," Phil agreed, nodding once as he folded his hands in front of him. "If we come to an agreement, a far more detailed treaty will be drawn up. But until then, to give you a brief overview, if Eldingvegr were to join the Antarctic Empire you could expect to maintain your position as Crown Prince and eventual King of the planet. Of course, certain decisions couldn't be made without consulting us first, especially in regards to blaziphane export and your military."

*Military.* Wilbur nearly had to bite his tongue to keep himself from speaking up at that. As much as he wanted to, he was determined not to jump in. Because Tommy didn't want him as his advisor anymore, so he doubted he'd listen to anything Wilbur had to say anyway. If Tommy didn't think to question the details like Wilbur was, that was his own fault.

...at least, that's what Wilbur kept telling himself. But it was far more difficult to keep quiet than he expected it to be.

"Okay, we've talked a shit ton about the blaziphane trade before. Would you guys be taking full control of our exports if we joined?" Tommy asked, and Wilbur dug his nails into his palm.

"Not full control per se," Technoblade explained, leaning back in his seat. "We'd draw up a plan, pretty much. One that had a list of planets that a certain amount of blaziphane had to be exported to every month, and how much the planets would pay for it. Obviously, those planets would be ones under the rule of the Antarctic Empire, like Zephyrs IV and the Nether. When it came to planets not under Antarctic rule or not allied with us, then we'd agree on a baseline price for how much to sell to them based on current market value and all that, and we'd meet regularly to see if it needed to be updated."

There was a question burning in Wilbur's mind. Because while that didn't sound like that terrible of an idea on the surface, there was so much *more* to that that needed to be discussed. But he knew that's what Tommy was going to be expecting of him. For him to jump in so it could give him an excuse to get pissed at Wilbur.

No, he wasn't going to hand that to Tommy.

A beat passed in silence. Tommy stared at the table, his shoulders shaking as he took a long breath. His eyes flickered up. Blue met brown, and Wilbur tensed, because he could tell

Tommy didn't know where to go from there. He was completely lost, and although he was trying to hide it, there was something pleading behind the icy flames. A cry for help.

Wilbur forced himself to meet Tommy's gaze, and didn't say a word as he straightened up in his chair.

A few seconds ticked by. Phil seemed to notice the staredown going on between the two boys, as he glanced between them a few times before sighing and leaning back in his chair.

"Orpheus," Phil then said, his wings rustling again, "I'd also like to hear your thoughts on this proposal, but you're not required to. If you wish to just observe, that's fine too."

Tommy narrowed his eyes at this, while Wilbur stiffened in his seat. It wasn't an order. Phil was giving him a choice. A way to bring up his worries without actually giving advice *to* Tommy.

It was almost annoying how well-crafted the move was. And as much as Wilbur wanted to hold up his petty streak and keep quiet, he knew he was going to drive himself nuts if he didn't say something. And Phil was giving him the perfect opportunity to do it.

"Well... I will admit, there is one question a proposal like that brings up in my head," Wilbur began, choosing his words carefully as he fiddled with the cuffs of his sleeves, "The thing is, blaziphane is not an unlimited resource. You want u- you want *Eldingvegr* to provide a specified amount of blaziphane at a discounted rate to the members and allies of the Antarctic Empire, and then sell the rest at standard prices to the rest of the galaxy. But the Antarctic Empire isn't small. If Eldingvegr sells the majority of its monthly yield to the Antarctic Empire at a discounted rate, then that's potentially a huge monetary loss for the planet. One it might not be able to withstand."

Something warm flashed over Phil's face at this, and he nodded slowly, considering Wilbur's words while Tommy shifted uncomfortably across from him.

"That's a fair point. I can assure you we'll keep in mind how much blaziphane is available before deciding how much you'll be selling to us for the month. If the yield is lower than we expected, we'll adjust accordingly so that you're still making a fair profit from the rest of your exports."

A few months before, Wilbur would've immediately dismissed Phil's words as bullshit. Because no one would pass up an opportunity to take as much blaziphane as they wanted. No one in their right mind at least.

But now, Wilbur found his certainty fading. Because while Phil was certainly in his right mind, he also wasn't a fool. Disrupting the blaziphane trade would have disastrous consequences for the rest of the galaxy. He'd even criticized Dream for doing exactly that since Essempi had taken over Eldingvegr.

Phil had always been honest with Wilbur, ever since he arrived on Zephys IV. That was one of the ways he promised he was different from the other leaders. And so far, he'd done nothing to contradict that.



For the first time, Wilbur found himself considering that maybe, just maybe, Phil wasn't lying. And although he should've been wondering if he was falling for Phil's manipulation, or if he was simply losing his own objectiveness because of how much closer he'd gotten with Phil as of late... he didn't.

Wilbur didn't know if he could trust Phil, but he wanted to. And more than anything else, that *scared* him.

"Thank you for your insight, Orpheus," Phil then said, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts.

"You're welcome, Phil," Wilbur said quietly, dipping his head as he settled back in his seat.

Suddenly, there was a scoff across the table.

"You're seriously calling *him* Phil, but you won't call me Tommy anymore?" Tommy asked, his voice echoing off the walls. "Right, okay, I see how it is."

The waves began to swell, and even beneath the surface, Wilbur could feel them picking him up and carrying him along with their destruction.

"Isn't this what you wanted, Your Highness?" Wilbur retorted, raising an eyebrow at Tommy. "After all, I am just a bastard child as you so kindly reminded me. I have no claim to Eldingvegr like you do. So why should I call you by your personal name and advise you during negotiations for a planet that isn't mine?"

Tommy winced, but didn't back down. Instead, his anger only seemed to grow as he placed his hands on the table.

"So this was your backup plan then?" Tommy asked, gesturing to Phil. "To go and fucking join the other side the minute you had a reason to?"

"I- I didn't join the other side!" Wilbur defended, his voice cracking as he pushed to his feet.

"Really? Because you're wearing their colors and staying in the goddamn Emperor's private wing of the palace, so that sure as fuck looks like you picked a side to me," Tommy snarled, also jumping to his feet.

Wilbur blinked, glancing down at the coat he'd already grown used to after several days of wearing it. Now that he was looking, he noticed that the embroidered star clusters that trailed down the sleeves and sides of the coat bore a striking resemblance to the type of embroidery decorating Phil's cloak and Technoblade's coat.

He thought back to how after he told Quackity he was staying in the personal wing, his good eye had trailed over the coat again, as if only seeing it for the first time. In his haze that first morning after the fight, Wilbur hadn't thought twice about wearing the new coat. But also...

Wilbur wasn't clueless. Even in his haze, even if he hadn't been consciously thinking about the implications of the coat, a part of him had known what it represented. Up until now though, no one had pointed it out to him, so he didn't acknowledge it.

Now it was being thrown in his face in a way he couldn't ignore. He wanted to trust Phil, but he wasn't blind to what he was doing. To the message he was sending to everyone about Wilbur's position in the palace.

But right now, Wilbur didn't want to focus on that. Because there was so much there he couldn't even begin to think about. The waves were roaring as they carried him along with their rage, and he wasn't fighting to breathe this time. The water had filled his lungs long ago, and all he could do was surrender to the suffocation.

"You should be happy, Theseus," Wilbur hissed, storming around the table so he and Tommy were eye to eye. "Isn't it better to not have to deal with me anymore? My paranoia? My anger? I know you told Ranboo all about how insufferable I was to be around. You got what you wanted. You don't have to deal with me anymore."

At this, Tommy's scowl twisted into something so full of rage, Wilbur wasn't even sure if there was a word that could properly capture it.

"For the love of fuck, get over yourself!" Tommy shouted, reaching out like he was going to shove Wilbur, but stopping at the last minute. He hesitated, and for a brief moment, the rage in his eyes was replaced with something so pained, it hurt Wilbur's chest just to look at. "You turned your back on me!" He then exclaimed, his voice cracking as he stumbled back.

And-

And Wilbur wished he could've said something else. He wished he could've taken a moment to actually see the anguish playing across his little brother's face, and acknowledge it for what it was.

Instead though, the waves roared in his ears, and Wilbur found himself shouting,

"You turned your back on me first!"

Because that's what Tommy had done, right? Instead of two brothers—two *equals*—Tommy had pointed out the truth they had silently agreed to never say out loud. That even if he was older and more educated than Tommy, Wilbur was always going to be beneath him. Tommy had power over Wilbur. And there was nothing either one of them could do about it.

Before Tommy could respond, there was a flash of pink behind him, and Wilbur watched as Technoblade dragged him back.

At the same time, there was a warm hand on his own shoulder, and Wilbur stumbled as Phil tugged him away.

"I think things have gotten a little too out of hand," Phil said, guiding Wilbur around the opposite side of the table from Tommy.

"Yup, I think you both need some time to cool off," Technoblade agreed, squeezing Tommy's shoulder. "We're not gonna get anywhere in the negotiations like this."

Wilbur flushed with embarrassment, because as much as he wanted to say it was all Tommy's fault for instigating things, he knew full well that wasn't true. Neither one of them had held their tempers like they should've, and regret was already curling around Wilbur's chest as he met Tommy's gaze across the room.

The fire had died out in Tommy's eyes. All that was left was pure, crushing exhaustion. They wore matching dark circles under their eyes, but the tiredness wasn't just physical. It was something deeper. Something that went down to their very bones.

Brothers. Or something that had once been like it.

With that, Phil pulled Wilbur out of the negotiations room, and Wilbur didn't fight it. Once outside, Wilbur noticed Jack stiffen up when he spotted them both. But Phil held up a hand to him, gesturing for him to stay as he led Wilbur down the hall and away from the room.

Once they were a fair distance from the doors, Phil stopped walking, his wings brushing against the floor before he pulled them tighter against his back and turned to face Wilbur.

"Orpheus-

"Don't," Wilbur said, cutting Phil off before he could start. "I know what you're going to say. That was immature of me. I fucked up. I should've handled myself better. I fucking get it, okay?"

Although the waves were no longer carrying him in their currents, saltwater was still burning his throat, and his jaw hurt from how tightly he'd been clenching it. His anger had calmed for now, but now he was left with the hollow aftershock of it all. Like the ruins left behind after a flood.

The tense expression on Phil's face immediately softened, and he let out a quiet sigh, squeezing the hand he still had resting on his shoulder.

"While you could've handled yourself better, I think Techno and I are both also partially to blame here," Phil said, glancing at the ground. "This was too abrupt. Neither of you had been told you would be negotiating again today, or even warned that you would be seeing the other. That was unfair of us both, and it won't happen again."

...oh.

Phil wasn't blaming him?

"Yeah, that-" Wilbur's breathing hitched, a lump forming in his throat when he realized that despite what a fucking mess that was, Phil wasn't mad at him. "That wasn't very fair."

Phil's brows pinched, and he shifted his hand from Wilbur's shoulder to the back of his neck. "You know, before we, uh, had to end things, I wanted to tell you that you did really well in there," Phil told him, his voice low. "Your question about the blaziphane yield was smart. You pointed out a flaw in my logic that didn't come off as hostile, but was a real issue that needed to be addressed."

Despite how miserable he was feeling overall, Wilbur couldn't help the warmth that flooded through him at the praise.

"It seemed obvious to me," he murmured, dipping his head as he took a breath to steady himself. "But thank you, Phil."

"Things like that aren't obvious to everyone," Phil pointed out, rubbing small circles into the back of his neck. "Your mind is made for these kinds of discussions. You understand how others twist words to hide their true meaning, which is an invaluable skill to have in politics."

Cheeks burning, Wilbur shook his head, avoiding Phil's eyes. "You don't need to blow smoke up my ass to try and make me feel better."

"I'm not just saying shit. I mean it. You have *so much* potential, little bird."

Wilbur was blinking fast now, but not because he was upset. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The praise was simple, but it sounded so unbelievably genuine.

At that, Wilbur thought back to his realization inside the negotiations room. That he wanted to trust Phil.

Could he trust that Phil was telling him the truth here? That he truly thought that Wilbur had potential?

He didn't know. But in this moment, with the gaping wound in his chest having been ripped open from where it had barely begun to heal... he decided that wanting to trust him was good enough. At least for now.

Wilbur didn't think about hugging Phil. All he could think was that he was still so tired from the argument, and everything inside of him ached so badly, that next thing he knew he was stepping forward and wrapping his arms around the man. He buried his face in Phil's shoulder, and Phil stiffened, clearly surprised by the sudden contact.

But before Wilbur could even think about pulling away, there was the sound of rustling, and the wings wrapped around him once again. Phil hugged him back, and for a moment—just a moment—nothing hurt. None of it mattered. Not Tommy, not Eldingvegr, not anyone else inside the palace.

For a moment, he could just breathe.

Then, the sound of footsteps echoed through the hall, and Wilbur jolted away on instinct. Phil did the same, his wings quickly retreating to be tucked behind his back as he took a step away from Wilbur.

Wilbur glanced over his shoulder as soon as the mystery person turned the corner and came into view. He wasn't sure if he should be relieved or annoyed when he saw it was Ranboo, because while there were certainly worse people it could've been, Ranboo wasn't anywhere near the top of his list for people he was okay with seeing.

“Oh, hi Phil,” Ranboo waved, pausing for a moment at the end of the hallway before continuing to walk towards them. “Hi Orpheus.”

“Hello Ranboo,” Phil greeted, dipping his head. “What are you doing over here?”

Ranboo blinked, shrinking back like he always did when Wilbur’s gaze landed on him. “Um, Techno sent me over. He said he wants to talk to you when you’re done talking to Orpheus.”

Phil looked back at Wilbur, something conflicted flashing through his eyes before shaking himself off. “Oh, yes. We were just finishing up, right, Orpheus?”

Wilbur nodded, hoping Ranboo couldn’t tell how emotional he’d been only a few minutes before. “Yup, just finishing up.”

“Good. I should probably go talk to Techno then,” Phil said, walking around Ranboo to head back up the hallway the way they came. “Thank you for letting me know, Ranboo. And Orpheus, have one of the guards call me if you need anything else.”

And with that, Phil disappeared around the corner, leaving Wilbur completely alone with Ranboo.

For a beat, the two of them stared at each other.

Wilbur thought back to when he’d heard Ranboo speaking about him with Aimsey. How he’d pointed out that Wilbur didn’t ask to get put in the personal wing. Although Ranboo was quick to make judgements, he seemed to also genuinely want to understand Wilbur’s side of things. At least that’s the impression he got from all the questions Ranboo tried to ask him before.

The last time the two had properly spoken, Wilbur had been on the edge of a full breakdown. He’d been cruel for the sake of needing a punching bag to take his frustration out on.

*“I thought we could be friends too, Orpheus.”*

*“That’s how I know you’re a liar. Because we were never anything close to friends.”*

His own words echoing in his mind almost made him wince. Although he didn’t think he was necessarily wrong, Wilbur knew he’d gone too far with how he handled that. Of course, he hadn’t exactly been in his right mind when he said those things, but shame bubbled up inside of him nonetheless at the reminder.

He took a breath. Ranboo was shifting from foot to foot, like he wasn’t sure if he should leave or not.

“I was a dick to you the last time I saw you,” Wilbur said, figuring there was no point in beating around the bush.

Ranboo furrowed his brows. “I- I mean- You were upset. I get that.”

Wilbur shook his head. “No, it wasn’t right of me to take that out on you. You were kind of just at the wrong place at the wrong time.” He paused, eyes falling to the floor. “I’m sorry about that.”

There was a beat of silence.

Then,

“It’s okay.”

Glancing up, Wilbur saw Ranboo was giving him a small smile, and a tiny bit of guilt lifted itself off of his shoulders.

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course, man,” Ranboo nodded, letting out his own breath of relief. “You were dealing with some stuff, so I get it. But I appreciate the apology.”

Although Wilbur didn’t smile back, he nodded. “I- I’m glad.”

A moment passed. Wilbur wondered if this was his cue to leave.

But then, Ranboo spoke again.

“How, um, how are you doing though?” Ranboo asked, giving him a worried look. “I heard about the, uh, argument you had with Tommy. And Techno told me you guys were reopening the negotiations today. So did those go okay?”

And there it was again.

The nagging in the back of his mind. A little voice telling him that he couldn’t trust Ranboo. That Ranboo was too nosy for his own good. That it was strange for him to jump right into asking about the negotiations as soon as they had smoothed things over.

But Wilbur did his best to shove that voice as far away as he could. Because he’d stopped trusting everyone around him, and look where he ended up. He still wasn’t sure if he could trust Phil, but he wanted to. And while he didn’t have any more confidence in Ranboo either, Aimsey was right when they pointed out that Wilbur had never given Ranboo a chance to earn his trust.

Wilbur was exhausted. Exhausted because of Tommy, exhausted because of his situation, exhausted because of the constant paranoia he’d been living with for the past several months.

He wanted to try something else. So maybe he could start by having a normal conversation with Ranboo.

“They didn’t go great,” Wilbur answered honestly, twisting his fingers into the fabric of his coat pockets and ignoring his discomfort at admitting this so openly. “Uh, Tommy and I got into an argument, so Phil and Technoblade had to cut it short and separate us.”

Ranboo blinked. “Oh.” A pause.

Then, in a surprisingly soft voice,

“Are you okay, Orpheus?”

Wilbur thought back to the sensation of warm wings wrapped around his back, and how starkly it contrasted with the cold that ran through him when Tommy had met his eyes.

“No,” Wilbur admitted, shaking his head. “Not right now.”

Even though things weren’t okay, there was a certain measure of relief that came with admitting it. He wasn’t okay. But there was no one around telling him he *had* to be okay.

And that in itself was another weight off his shoulders.

## Chapter End Notes

crimeboys enjoyers I'm so sorry I know this hurts I promise it'll be worth it i promise just trust me you gotta trust me I know what I'm doing-

anyway that meeting, uh, did not go well. really what else did phil and techno suspect lmao

ok I gotta go walk my dog but please let me know what you thought of the chapter down in the comments below!! I love seeing your thoughts and discussions, they seriously make my day <3

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees ! reminder if you wanna see the many, many analysis discussions I've had with readers about this fic on my tumblr, go look at everything on my blog tagged #the stars and their children. I talk about this fic all the time over there

# drowning over and over and over again

## Chapter Summary

Some important conversations happen.

## Chapter Notes

hi everyone I'm back again!! I know I know, you weren't expecting to see me again so soon but here I am!

I was really excited to write this chapter. It's one I've been waiting to write for ages so it felt really good to finally get to do it. It also is an insanely important chapter, and a lot of stuff is going to shift now

okay that's all I'll say for now. hope you guys enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur still couldn't sleep.

It had been several days since the argument in the negotiations room, and Wilbur had yet to find any relief from the nightmares that plagued him every time he shut his eyes. If anything, they were only getting worse. He'd gasp awake, panic wrapping around his throat and forcing the air out of his lungs as he tried to remind himself that he wasn't back on Eldingvegr. That he wasn't about to be killed by Essempi soldiers. That Tommy was safe.

In the past, Wilbur had worried about Tommy's safety on Zephyr IV because he didn't trust Phil and Technoblade to keep their word not to harm him. Now, even though he knew that wasn't a concern, his worries hadn't lessened.

He woke up thinking about Tommy, and fell asleep thinking about him too. What he was doing, how he was doing, what his daily routine was now without Wilbur around, if he was doing better than Wilbur himself was—he had so many questions, but zero answers to any of them.

In a way, it was almost like Tommy was a ghost. Haunting his every moment, waking or not.

He didn't understand why this was happening. Why his mind couldn't seem to let go of his little brother, even for a day. Wilbur was drowning in a sea of emotions he couldn't understand. A wave would crash, and he would be angry at Tommy again for all the things he'd said. Sea foam would fizzle, and sadness would overwhelm him as he thought back to



the relationship he'd lost. Even though he was under the waves now, they still roared in his ears, deafening him to everything else.

Wilbur was exhausted.

Besides his near constant crisis over Tommy, Wilbur couldn't help but find himself agonizing over his revelation during the negotiations meeting as well. The fact that he wanted to trust Phil was something his mind was simultaneously fighting against, and trying to accept. It was getting to the point where if his worries about Tommy weren't keeping him awake, then everything with Phil was instead. And he was just so unbelievably tired of all of it.

One day, when Wilbur had woken with a hazy mind and sleep clinging to his skin, he asked Jack to take him to the rooftop again. He hadn't been there since before his fight with Tommy, but he craved the icy air. He needed it to wrap around him, stab into his skin and chase away the fog settled over his thoughts.

As soon as they stepped through the trapdoor, Wilbur got his wish. A frigid breeze blew over the balcony, threading under his coat and settling deep in his bones. He shuddered, the dredges of sleep being carried away with the cold, and settled himself at his usual spot on one end of the landing. Jack sat across from him.

There was no silence on the roof. Not with the howling wind echoing in Wilbur's ears—so different from the wind on Eldingvegr, but familiar nonetheless. But neither he or Jack spoke the first few minutes they were up there, so it was silence all the same.

“Jack,” Wilbur then said, getting the guard's attention, “I feel like I'm lost.”

“Lost how?” Jack asked, pulling his knees up to his chest as he stared out at the city skyline. “Like, I know you mean metaphorically because, y'know, I brought you up here so you're not literally lost. But I mean- I dunno I guess... yeah I don't know where I'm going with this.”

Wilbur snorted at Jack's rambling, eyes sliding away from the city to give his friend a small smile. “Don't worry, I know what you mean.” His smile faded again, gaze fixing on a blank spot of wall just above Jack's head. “I'm lost for what to do, I guess. This whole time I've been trying to keep Eldingvegr from joining the Antarctic Empire, but Tommy seems determined to move ahead with that anyway and I just...” he hesitated, a confession he never wanted to put into words sitting on the tip of his tongue.

A beat passed. Wilbur lowered his gaze to meet Jack's eyes.

“I can trust you.”

It wasn't a question, but Jack responded anyway.

“Whatever you say up here stays between us,” he reassured him. Then, he cracked a smile. “And if it'll make you feel better, I can give you some grade A blackmail about me as collateral.”

Wilbur snorted again. Jack was pretty much the only person who could get him to laugh these days.

“That won’t be necessary, but I appreciate the offer,” he said, resting his head against the wall. “Even though all my education, all the training I’ve gone through to be an advisor is telling me not to trust someone like you, I do. And right now, I feel like if I don’t say something my head is gonna fucking explode.”

Another pause. Jack was quiet as he waited for Wilbur to continue.

This was it. Once he said this out loud, it would be real.

“The thing is, Tommy seems determined to move ahead with Eldingvegr joining the Empire, and at this point I think... I think I’m starting to agree with him.”

And there it was. The truth that Wilbur hadn’t wanted to put into words. That after all this time, after all these battles—his resolve was crumbling.

For a moment, Jack didn’t react.

Then,

“What’s made you change your mind?”

It was a casual question. Not like Jack was *trying* to be casual. But that he was just curious what Wilbur’s reasoning for this was.

“I wouldn’t say I’ve fully changed my mind,” Wilbur said, eyes flickering to the giant spikes of ice dangling miles above his head. “But I have to face the music sometime, right? There’s not really another option here. Eldingvegr has no advantage here. No bargaining power. Phil and Technoblade could’ve taken Eldingvegr ages ago, but they didn’t. So we-” he flinched. “I mean, I guess Tommy should take advantage of the fact that he still has a seat at the table and try to work out a good deal.”

At this, Jack frowned. “Why’re you not including yourself in that?”

Wilbur shrugged. “Tommy doesn’t want me there. From a legal standpoint I need to be around for negotiations because he’s a minor and can’t negotiate alone, but... I don’t think it’s really my place to be involved in the discussion anymore.”

A moment passed as Jack considered this, his frown deepening as his eyes fell to the ground.

“I’m pretty sure Philza still wants you involved,” he then told him.

Huffing, Wilbur dragged his hands through his hair, wincing when his fingers got snagged on knots. “Phil, yeah. I think he wants me there too, but I just- I dunno. He’s the main reason my head is so fucked up about all this is in the first place.”

“What do you mean? I thought you two were... friends, I guess?” Jack asked, a crease forming between his brows.

“Friends.” Wilbur murmured the word, considering it and wondering if it applied to whatever it was he and Phil were. It wasn’t *wrong* per se, but it felt too... simple. Too small to encompass whatever dynamic the two had established at this point.

Phil wasn’t his friend, but he wasn’t an enemy either. He gave Wilbur advice and offered him comfort when he was at his lowest point. He read Wilbur stories from Elytra when he was upset, and seemed to know exactly when Wilbur needed to be pushed, and when he needed to back off.

Phil wasn’t his friend, but he called Wilbur ‘little bird’ and said that if he had wings, he’d teach him how to control them.

There was a word for what Wilbur felt like Phil could be to him, but it was something he was far too afraid to admit out loud. While friend was too small, this other word was too large. It meant far too much, implied a level of closeness that Wilbur wasn’t sure they had.

So he went for a different word. One that wasn’t quite right, but was at least a bit better than the simplicity of ‘friend’.

“I’d say he’s more of a mentor to me,” Wilbur said, hair falling over his eyes. “And that’s why everything is so confusing now. Because a part of me wants to believe what Phil says. That he won’t fuck over Eldingvegr the second the treaty is signed, and he’ll actually stick to his promises. But it goes against everything I’ve ever been taught about politics. No one is honest. It’s all just a game to see whose bullshit is the shiniest.” He paused, taking a breath.

“I want to trust him,” he admitted in a smaller voice. “I want to believe what he says so fucking badly. That he’s not going to fuck us over. But at the same time, he just does things that- that don’t make sense.”

“Like what?” Jack asked, his voice much softer now.

“Oh, don’t act like you don’t know,” Wilbur scoffed. “The way he favors me? Gives me all sorts of privileges no other ruler would dream of giving a foreign prince? If it was Tommy, at least that would sort of make sense. Because he’s the one with the political power. If he gets on Tommy’s good side, he has a higher chance of making a good deal with him. But Phil just- he doesn’t care about that! It’s just me!”

The saltwater was burning his throat again, and Wilbur had to take deep breaths to try and calm down his racing heart. There was just so much going on in his head. Emotions twisting and curling around like wisps of smoke. He didn’t understand it. He didn’t understand Phil at all.

“He says I have potential,” Wilbur then murmured, burying his face in his knees. “And I’m not blind. I’ve always picked up on this kind of political stuff easier than Tommy does. But even then, it doesn’t make sense. Seeing some random bastard kid with the potential to be a good politician doesn’t match up with everything Phil’s done for me.”

Jack considered this, nodding to himself as rested one of his arms on top of his knee. “Mate, I can’t speak for Philza, so I don’t think I can give you the answers you’re looking for. But I

think you're overthinking this one."

Behind his knees, Wilbur frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that sometimes, people can just care about other people without there being an agenda to it," Jack explained, almost like he was trying to get through to a child.

Wilbur blinked. Of course he knew that. But that only extended to people that were actually close to you. Like family or friends. At least, that was how it worked in the world of politics. Close connections outside of your immediate circle were only made to play the game, and nothing more.

Phil cared about him. Wilbur knew that. But there had to be a reason for it. If not manipulation, then something similar. Even if it was genuine affection, there was a motive behind it. Something he could get out of it.

But Wilbur had no idea what that was. And as Jack had said, if he wanted to find out, he needed to ask Phil directly.

"Is Phil in his office right now?" Wilbur asked after a few minutes of silence.

Raising a hand to his earpiece, Jack gave him a small smile. "Let me check."

A few minutes later, the two were walking back into the personal wing, and turning down the hall that led to Phil's office. Anxiety thrummed through Wilbur's chest like a drum, lighting up his veins and making the waves crash over and over onto themselves.

He didn't have the slightest clue how he was going to start this conversation. Truth be told, he wasn't even sure what he was asking.

Wilbur just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more going on with all of this. The favoritism. The claim Phil was putting on him. Unease settled in his gut, spurring him to quicken his pace to Phil's office.

It didn't take long to reach the familiar door. Jack gave him the go ahead, and Wilbur knocked, only having to wait a few moments before it slid open with a soft hiss.

Except-

Except Phil wasn't in his office.

Frowning, Wilbur poked his head inside, glancing around to see where Phil could be. Every time he'd been in here so far, Phil had either been right by the door, or sitting behind his desk. But the chair behind the desk was empty. The chairs in front of the desk were empty. There was no sign of life in the office whatsoever.

Wilbur's heart began to pound faster. But before he could start to worry, there was a familiar voice calling above him.

"Up here, mate."

Looking up, Wilbur gasped when he spotted the Emperor. He'd forgotten about the rafters that stretched high into the ceiling, but was starkly reminded of them when his eyes fell on Phil, who was sitting casually on one of them with his wings slumped behind him.

The door behind Wilbur slid shut. He didn't even notice as his head tilted up to face Phil fully.

"Why are you up there?" He asked, narrowing his eyes to try and make out more of Phil's silhouette against the shadows. "*How* did you even get up there?"

At this, Phil huffed and pushed to his feet, standing on the thin rafter with surprisingly good balance. "Take a wild guess," he teased, gesturing to the wings stretched out behind him.

Oh. Yeah. Having wings meant Phil could fly.

Before Wilbur could try and stammer out an excuse for why he didn't make such an obvious connection, Phil was bending his legs, and angling his wings to take off again. Wilbur's eyes widened as he watched the void black feathers all curve at once, wind rustling the garland stretched below the rafters as Phil took off into the air.

In one swift motion, Phil did a swooping backflip, flying underneath the rafter he'd just been sitting on and gliding back down to the ground. A puff of air rustled Wilbur's hair as Phil landed in front of him, the braids he always had twisted into his hair coming loose with all the movement.

For a moment, all Wilbur could do was gape at Phil.

He'd never seen Phil fly before. He knew he had wings, and he knew those wings were capable of flight. This had never been a secret to him. But he'd never seen the wings as more than just an... extra set of limbs? Well, he supposed that's what they were anyway. It was still odd to see Phil actually *fly* with them though.

His flying was graceful. It was also fast, and surprisingly precise given the size of his wings.

And in a way, it was also terrifying. Because he'd heard the stories. Of soldiers who fell to an invisible foe, with the last thing they saw being a pair of wings as dark as the void of space itself. An Emperor who could slice down his enemies with one swoop. Death from above.

*This* was the man who had held Wilbur when he was at his lowest point, knuckles bruised from punching a wall because his brother had insulted him. The Emperor of the Antarctic Empire. The Ice King.

The Ice King smiled at Wilbur's shock, and the frost keeping Wilbur silent melted away immediately.

"Sorry, I just-" Wilbur blinked, shaking himself off. "I've never seen you fly before."

Phil's smile softened. "Really? I suppose that makes sense. I don't have much reason to fly around here, but sometimes I just get the urge to stretch my wings, you know?"

Wilbur didn't know. Because no matter how many people told Wilbur he reminded them of Phil, he wasn't *really* like Phil. He didn't have his wings. He didn't have his ruthlessness.

"That makes sense," Wilbur said instead, shoving his hands in his coat pockets.

His head was spinning again. Because flying aside, Wilbur had come in here for a reason. One he wasn't even sure how to put into words. It was almost laughable how he used to think of himself as being good with speaking. He'd lost that ability when he arrived on this frigid planet, just like every other familiar aspect of himself.

Phil's brows furrowed, his smile fading as he took in Wilbur's expression.

"Orpheus," he said, quieter this time, "did you come to speak with me about something?"

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur forced himself to nod. "Yes, I did."

Phil considered this for a moment, eyes darting between Wilbur's face and the rest of the room. After a beat, he nodded, and gestured for Wilbur to come over to the desk.

This time, Wilbur didn't need to pull his chair around to sit next to Phil, because Phil did it for him. He grabbed one of the chairs that sat on the opposite side of the desk and moved it so it was only a few feet from his own. He gestured for Wilbur to sit, before doing the same in his own seat, folding his hands together in front of him.

His heart was pounding against his ribs. Dread clawed its way up his throat, leaving the taste of blood mixed with saltwater heavy on his tongue. It was a fight to keep his breathing even. He wanted nothing more than to get to his feet, and run out of this room as fast as possible.

But he was here. He was here, and the question was hanging in the air between them, just waiting for Wilbur to put it into words.

"I don't understand you," he finally said after several long minutes.

Phil raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"It- It is," Wilbur nodded, eyes falling to the ground. "You said before that you don't care about the possible consequences of playing favorites. You don't care what political rules you break with it, and that's- fine, I get it. Zephys IV doesn't work like other royal courts. I can understand that. But I still don't understand why you're showing me so much favoritism."

"Because... I'm closer with you than I am with your brother," Phil tried, looking more confused than anything else.

Wilbur shook his head. "That's not-" he groaned, dragging his hands down his face. A breath rattled through his lungs as he tried to slow down his racing thoughts, so he could put this in a way Phil would understand. "A while ago, you said you were interested in me because I remind you of your younger self. You've told me before that I have potential. But it just- it doesn't make sense to do all the things you've done for me just because of that. You think I'm interesting, so we talk a lot. Okay, that makes sense. But even if you think I have potential and all that, it just doesn't line up with everything you've done for me."

Phil's brows furrowed at this. "What do you mean by the things I've done for you? How does it not line up?"

"All of it," Wilbur told him, curling in on himself. "Giving me permission to see you whenever I want, granting me a room in your personal wing, inviting me to take meals with you, comforting me every time I come to you with my stupid fucking problems-" his breathing hitched, and he tugged at his sleeves. "Giving me this *coat*! Knowing full well what it means to have me wearing it! There's no reason to do this! Sure, I think at this point you might have some genuine affection for me, but there should still be a reason that you're giving me so much when I've done nothing to deserve it."

For a moment, Phil was silent. Wilbur kept his eyes on his lap, tugging at the edges of his sleeves over and over until his fingertips were bright red.

"Orpheus, can you please look at me?"

Wilbur didn't want to. Because his heart was sitting in his throat, and fear was racing through him as he realized the enormity of what he'd just said. How vulnerable he was right now, sitting here with all of his worries laid out between him and Phil. He was terrified to see what Phil's reaction to this was. What he thought of Wilbur now.

But Wilbur couldn't stare at the ground forever. So he swallowed down his fear, and forced himself to meet Phil's eyes.

Wilbur had been expecting a lot of things. Phil's cold, neutral mask he wore when he didn't want others to know what he was thinking. Maybe something twinged with annoyance, for Wilbur dumping all of this out in front of him. Or maybe he was just expecting that distant, foggy look he had when he told Wilbur what 'little bird' meant on Elytra.

The one thing Wilbur hadn't been expecting was sadness.

Sorrow carved lines into Phil's face, creasing his forehead and bending the feathers that trailed his cheekbones. His shoulders were slumped, like Wilbur's words were physically weighing him down. It was almost as if Wilbur's words had *hurt* him. But why would they?

"Look, I'm not the best at wording my own thoughts sometimes so I'll just keep this simple," Phil said quietly. "The reason I give you all these privileges is just because I want to. There doesn't always need to be a big, grand reason for it. Sometimes you just... want to do things for other people."

Frowning, Wilbur's eyes fell back down to the ground. "Jack told me something similar. That not everything someone does needs to have a reason or an agenda attached to it."

"He's right," Phil nodded.

That sent another pang through Wilbur's chest, and he curled in tighter on himself.

"But-" he hesitated, waves drowning out everything else around him. "But I always thought the reason no one on Eldingvegr gave a shit about me was because they had no reason to. I

had no political standing. There was no reason to be nice to the bastard child. So they weren't."

"Oh, little bird," Phil murmured, reaching out to grab Wilbur's chin, pulling his face up so their eyes were meeting again. "I thought I could've gotten this through to you by now, but I suppose I should just be direct."

Wilbur blinked, wondering why it felt like there was an iron band wrapping around his chest. "What do you mean?"

Phil shifted his hand so it was cupping Wilbur's cheek, and Wilbur had to fight to keep himself from leaning into the warmth.

"The way you were treated on Eldingvegr was wrong," Phil told him, ice blue eyes locking with brown. "Obviously, I don't know the extent of what you went through, but from what you've told me and what I've figured out on my own, I know enough to say you didn't deserve that sort of scorn."

"I know that," Wilbur said, frowning as he tried to pull his face away.

Phil didn't let him go. "I don't think you do. You say you do, you say that you're angry about how unfairly you were treated, but I don't think you've really accepted that there was no reason for them to do that to you at all."

Wilbur ripped his face away from Phil's hand, lurching back in his seat as he tried to get his stuttering breaths under control.

Of course he knew he was treated unfairly on Eldingvegr. He'd always known that. And even if he didn't, Niki was there to make sure he knew.

But-

But it was understandable, right?

He was a bastard child. Technically speaking, he had no right to live on Eldingvegr after his mother died. The only blood tie to the throne he had was Tommy, and if something ever happened to him, Wilbur would probably be shipped back to Themis.

"They had a reason," Wilbur argued. "I had no real reason to stay on Eldingvegr besides Tommy. I was living like royalty for a planet that wasn't supposed to be mine. Of course it frustrated the citizens. It wasn't fair to me because I didn't choose to be a bastard, but it wasn't like they just decided to hate me out of the blue."

"No, Orpheus. Even if they were frustrated with the situation, you were a *child*. The adults around you should've known better than to take it out on you. You were the only family Theseus had left, so of course you were going to stay with him. If they had problems with that, they shouldn't have made you aware of it."

"You're- You're making this bigger than it needs to be," Wilbur said, trying to backtrack. "It wasn't that bad. It's not like I was beaten or anything."



Sighing, Phil pinched the bridge of his nose. “You just asked me why I’ve been nice to you because I didn’t have a good reason for it. But people don’t need a reason to be nice, just like people don’t need a reason to be cruel. As a child, you were surrounded by adults who chose to be cruel to you for something that wasn’t your fault. Yes, there was logic behind why they *wanted* to be cruel to you, but there was no actual reason for them to.”

“That- no, that doesn’t make sense,” Wilbur stammered. “Because if there was no reason then- then that means-”

Then that meant Wilbur’s childhood was so, *so* much worse than he ever realized. And for some reason, that realization made him sick to his stomach.

His breathing was getting faster. Saltwater was burning his lungs and his throat.

“I deserved better,” he whispered, staring at his hands.

“You did,” Phil agreed, moving his chair closer. “And while I can’t change the past, I want you to know that even though you’ve been overlooked your entire life, you’re not being overlooked now.”

Wilbur glanced up, chest squeezing when he met Phil’s eyes.

“When I say you have potential, I mean it,” Phil told him. “At the end of all this, if you just go back to Eldingvegr like nothing happened, that potential is going to be wasted. But if you and your brother join the Empire, I can make sure you’re never brushed aside like that again.”

“What are you saying?” Wilbur whispered.

“I can teach you, little bird,” Phil said, reaching out again to rest a hand on Wilbur’s shoulder, and this time Wilbur didn’t pull away. “Let me help you become something great.”

Oh.

Wilbur stared at Phil for a moment, struggling to wrap his head around what he was saying. This was an offer. An upfront, no bullshit offer to mentor him. To guide him so he could become a better version of himself he never could back on Eldingvegr.

What scared Wilbur wasn’t that Phil offered this. No, he’d honestly been expecting this for quite a while now.

The thing that scared Wilbur thought was the fact that he had to stop himself from saying yes.

He wanted it. He wanted it so badly, it was painful to keep his mouth shut. He wanted someone to look at him, to actually *see* him and not just see a bastard child. Phil was that person. He saw Wilbur, and saw what he was truly capable of. It was terrifying but exhilarating at the same time—to be recognized for the first time in his life.

But this would have consequences. He still hadn’t even had a proper conversation with Tommy since the fight, ignoring the mess that was the negotiations. Tommy already thought

he had betrayed him. Wilbur couldn't even consider agreeing to an offer like this until things with Tommy were more stable.

"I... I need to think about it," Wilbur said after a few moments, his voice hoarse.

There was no disappointment from Phil at the refusal. He just nodded, squeezing his shoulder once before pulling back again. "Of course. Take as much time as you need. It's just something I want you to consider once we get the negotiations started again."

Something to consider. That's all it was.

Wilbur's vision swam as he pushed to his feet, backing away from Phil's desk so he could leave the office. There was so much going through his head right then. Far too much for him to process. For him to understand.

He left Phil's office with a mumbled goodbye, not even looking behind him as he stumbled out into the hall. Jack was immediately at his side, their shoulders brushing as his friend looked him over, no doubt noticing his heaving chest and flushed face.

"Bad?" Jack asked, brows pinched with worry.

Wilbur shook his head. This wasn't bad. He knew it wasn't bad. It was just... overwhelming.

"Complicated," he forced out instead. "It's just- Phil gave me a lot to think about."

Although the offer was at the forefront of his mind, there was also what Phil had said about Eldingvegr playing on loop in his ears.

There was no reason for the way people treated him. It wasn't unfortunate circumstances that made him a scapegoat for other's ire. It was just cruelty, plain and simple.

*He deserved better.*

"Do you wanna go back to your room?" Jack asked, startling Wilbur back to the present.

Wilbur glanced around the hall, blinking a few times as he tried to shove down the fierce ache in his chest.

"Yeah, let's go."

The two started to make their way down the hall. Wilbur's heart echoed in his ears, terror and relief flooding through him at the same time. In a way, it was like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders hearing that he hadn't deserved that treatment in the slightest. But at the same time, it made him want to puke. Because Eldingvegr was his home. This entire time, he'd been fighting to get back there. But how could he go back now that he knew just how terrible it was for him there?

Before Wilbur could think more on that though, there was the sound of footsteps, and suddenly Wilbur found himself face to face with another familiar figure.

“Fuck,” Wilbur cursed under his breath.

“Nice to see you too, Orpheus,” Technoblade deadpanned, and heat flooded Wilbur’s cheeks when he realized the Emperor had heard that.

“I- I’m sorry, I didn’t-”

“Bruh, it’s fine, I don’t care,” Technoblade cut him off, not looking the slightest bit insulted as he crossed his arms over his chest. “To be totally honest, you have plenty of reasons to not wanna see me. Especially after that mess with the negotiations the other day.”

Pulling his mind away from his conversation with Phil, Wilbur flinched at the reminder of how Technoblade had to pull Tommy away from him. How he and Phil both had planned that entire thing, without giving any warning to him or Tommy before they were summoned there.

“Yeah, that was pretty shit of you,” Wilbur huffed, heartbeat slowing.

Technoblade nodded. “It was stupid, yeah. In all fairness though, we didn’t think you or your brother would agree to show up if we warned you beforehand, and we kinda needed you both there.”

...well, that was a bit more understandable. Because Wilbur definitely would’ve refused to go to the meeting if he knew what he was walking into ahead of time.

“Look how that turned out though,” Wilbur scoffed instead.

“Yeah, it definitely didn’t go according to plan,” Technoblade relented. “But, uh, I did wanna ask how you’ve been holding up since then, Orpheus.”

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. “Can’t you just ask Phil?”

Technoblade snorted. “Contrary to what you seem to think, I’d rather actually talk to you directly instead of just getting all my information about you from Phil.”

Oh.

While Wilbur shouldn’t have been surprised, he hadn’t been expecting that. Technoblade was awkward. Wilbur had figured that out quite a while ago. If Wilbur had taken a guess, he would’ve assumed that Technoblade only chose to talk to him when he didn’t feel he had another choice. After all, Wilbur wouldn’t blame him for it. The two of them hadn’t had the easiest relationship over the past few months, especially when it came to how close he’d gotten with Tommy in such a short span of time.

Technoblade was difficult for Wilbur to get a read on. He could never tell where the two of them stood. He wanted to dislike the Emperor, but it seemed like more than anything, he just was focused on getting the negotiations finished. He wasn’t cruel or manipulative about it. He had a goal, and he wanted to stick to it. In a way, Wilbur could almost admire him for that.

Wilbur was still trying to work on shoving down his distrust. So maybe it wouldn't hurt to just try and talk to Technoblade. Like they could almost be friends.

“Honestly... not great,” Wilbur admitted, eyes falling to the floor. “I don’t really know what’s going on with To- with Theseus, and it’s not great for my stress.”

Technoblade nodded at this, considering him for a moment.

“You’re still calling him Theseus?”

Wilbur winced. “I suppose I am.”

A beat passed.

“I’m not gonna push you one way or the other with that whole thing. That’s for the two of you to figure out on your own. Theseus is pretty stressed too, but if you wanna find out what’s going on with him, you gotta ask him yourself.”

Frowning, Wilbur glanced up to meet Technoblade’s eyes. “You do realize you can’t continue the negotiations until the two of us can manage to be in the same room again, right?”

Technoblade huffed. “Of course I do.”

“Then why are you saying you’re not gonna push us into trying to talk?” Wilbur asked. “Wouldn’t it be more beneficial for you to get us to talk things out sooner rather than later?”

“Yeah, it would. But even if you’re young, you’re not little kids. You’re old enough to work things out on your own, and we can’t force you to do that if you don’t want to.”

Wilbur blinked. Even though the negotiations needed to happen, they were also... giving him and Tommy time to work things out on their own? Without interfering?

“I don’t understand,” Wilbur admitted after a moment. “You guys need us for the negotiations-”

“Orpheus, no one can force you to do anything you don’t want to do,” Technoblade said, cutting Wilbur off. “Phil and I are doing what we can to postpone the negotiations. If it gets to a point where we can’t postpone it anymore, we’ll talk to you both about it before we reopen anything. Does that work?”

There was far more understanding there than Wilbur expected. It didn’t make sense for Phil and Technoblade to try and postpone negotiations simply because he and Tommy couldn’t get their shit together. But they were.

“Thank you, Technoblade,” Wilbur murmured, another weight lifting off his shoulders.

“Kid, Technoblade is a mouthful. You can just call me Techno.”

Wilbur blinked again, his chest squeezing again. “Oh. Okay, Techno.”

It was both strange to say, but not at the same time. Because even if they had a very different dynamic to the way he and Phil interacted, Wilbur was slowly realizing that he and Techno weren't on *bad* terms with each other. It was just... different. Techno behaved differently than Phil did. And with time, Wilbur was getting a better idea of how to read between the lines of what the Emperor said and did.

He was giving them time when he had no reason to. Wilbur didn't even know what he wanted out of negotiations anymore, but Techno seemed to feel bad enough about the argument that he was going to give him the chance to think things through.

Suddenly, there was another set of footsteps making their way down the hall. Wilbur stiffened, but when Techno looked up, his shoulders relaxed, and Wilbur figured that meant it probably wasn't Tommy walking down this way.

"Oh, hi Techno. Hi Orpheus."

Annoyance flashed through Wilbur when he heard Ranboo's voice, but he forced himself to shove it down again. There was no reason for him to be such a dick to Ranboo. He was trying to give him a chance after all.

"Hey Ranboo," Techno greeted, stepping away from Wilbur with a small wave. "You here for our lessons?"

Ranboo nodded. "Yup! I'm not late, am I?"

Techno shook his head. "Nah, you're fine. I just need to go talk to Phil real quick, but then we can head out." He turned back to Wilbur. "Remember what I told you, Orpheus."

Wilbur nodded, although he wasn't sure which part Techno was referring to. "I will."

With that, Techno turned on his heel, heading down to Phil's office door. It was only after he was gone that Wilbur realized this left him alone with Ranboo. Again.

"Hey Orpheus," Ranboo said as soon as Techno was out of sight.

"Hi Ranboo," Wilbur sighed, folding his arms over his chest. "What are you up to today?"

"Oh, just waiting for Techno so we can start my strategy lessons," Ranboo explained, giving Wilbur a small smile. "What were you talking to Techno about?"

Resisting the urge to frown at Ranboo's nosiness, Wilbur shrugged. "Y'know, the usual. The negotiations and Theseus."

Immediately, Ranboo's brows furrowed. "You... You know he doesn't like it when you call him that, right?"

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur nodded. "He mentioned it during the last meeting, yeah."

"Then why do you keep doing it?" Ranboo pushed.

...fuck, Ranboo really wanted to make the whole, 'being nice' thing way harder for Wilbur, huh?

"Look, Ranboo, I don't mean this to be rude, but-"

"Oh, wait, that was me being nosy again," Ranboo said, cutting him off with wide eyes. "Shoot. I'm sorry, Tommy keeps telling me I need to stop doing that."

Almost as quickly as it appeared, Wilbur's annoyance faded away.

"It's okay. Thanks for understanding," Wilbur said, relieved that he didn't have to get into it with Ranboo again.

A beat of silence passed. Ranboo's brows furrowed again, like he had something else he wanted to say.

Wilbur waited.

And waited.

And,

"Can I ask you something? You- You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Fighting to keep his face neutral, Wilbur nodded. "Uh, sure."

Taking a shaky breath, Ranboo's eyes fell to the ground, and he wrung his dual-toned hands together. "This is kind of, um, a weird question, but I just figured you might know the answer to it." He paused. "Do you have any tips on how to help Tommy calm down if he's upset?"

The question was like a punch to the gut. Pain flashed through Wilbur's chest, and he fought to keep his composure as he considered the question.

"Do-" He paused, taking a breath to steady his voice. "Do you mean upset as in panicked, or upset as in he's pissed?"

Ranboo kept his eyes on the ground. "Um, both?"

That hurt.

That hurt so much more than Wilbur expected it to.

Ranboo had to be really desperate to ask Wilbur for help on how to calm Tommy down. Not just from anger, but from panic as well. That meant Tommy could've had a panic attack that Wilbur wasn't around for. He could've even had multiple.

Fuck. Wilbur hated how much he cared about Tommy, because it was blatantly obvious that Tommy didn't feel the same. He was always going to love his little brother, but that same brother had practically spat in his face with the reminder that they only shared one parent. He

accused Wilbur of turning his back on him, when Wilbur had been the one fighting for Eldingvegr this entire time.

Eldingvegr was Tommy's planet, not Wilbur's. Tommy made sure Wilbur knew that. Made sure he remembered his place as the bastard child.

Tommy didn't want Wilbur as his brother anymore. It should've been easy for Wilbur to say the same, but he couldn't. Because he loved Tommy so much, it hurt. And Tommy was struggling without Wilbur there to help him. He *couldn't* help Tommy, because he didn't want Wilbur to.

At least, he couldn't help him directly.

"If he's pissed, you have to let him get out all his anger at once. Let him scream and curse and do whatever he needs to do. Once he stops, just try to be there for him. Even if you're just silent, not being alone helps him a lot. Unless he tells you to leave him alone. If he says to get out, don't argue, just do it. He knows when he needs some time on his own to cool off," Wilbur explained, slipping into autopilot as he tried not to let his voice waver. "And if he's panicking, um-" his breathing hitched, "touch grounds him. Always ask before you touch him if he's freaking out, but he'll usually say yes. Just try to hold his hand or rest a hand on his shoulder or something. It should help."

Ranboo nodded. "Okay. That helps a lot. Thank you, Orpheus."

Before he could say anything else, there was the sound of a door opening, and Techno's voice calling from down the hall. "Ranboo! Let's go!"

"Oh, I should, uh, go," Ranboo said, straightening up with a jolt. "Thanks for the help with Tommy."

Numbly, Wilbur watched Ranboo back away. "Bye Ranboo."

And just like that, Ranboo was gone, and Wilbur was left alone with Jack again.

Jack, who had silently watched both those conversations play out.

Jack, who was learning how to read the emotions that played across Wilbur's face.

Jack, who didn't need to be told to know exactly what Wilbur needed now.

"C'mon Wil," Jack said, nudging his shoulder, "let's get back to your room."

And Wilbur followed without a word.



That night, Wilbur asked to take dinner in his room.

Somehow, both so much and so little had happened in the span of a single day. Saltwater filled up his lungs as the waves above deafened him, but all he could do was sit on the sand

and watch them crash from the bottom of the ocean.

Wilbur didn't know what he was supposed to do now. There was a clear choice presented to him, and it would've been one thing if his heart was pushing him one direction while his head pushed him the other. But that wasn't actually the case.

No, it was easier than that. Or at least, it should've been. Because both logic and emotion were driving him towards the same place.

Letting Eldingvegr join the Empire, and taking Phil up on his offer.

Phil was giving him an out he never would've gotten on Eldingvegr. A chance to be something more. To break out of the future fate had chosen for him and actually reach his full potential. When Phil looked at him, he didn't see a bastard. No, he saw *Wilbur*.

In a way, it made him feel vulnerable. To finally be seen after being overlooked for so many years. But at the same time, there was a certain satisfaction that came with it. Because this was what Wilbur had been craving for so many years. He wanted to be more than a bastard child, and on Zephyr IV, that was true. He could finally be something more.

Wilbur only had to lose Tommy to get it.

And that's the part that Wilbur couldn't reconcile with. Because no matter how badly he wanted a different path, he couldn't leave his brother behind. Even if he was the only one who saw them as brothers anymore.

Unsurprisingly, this question kept him tossing and turning well into the night. He stared at the gauzy canopy above his bed, watching the glittering threads twinkle like the stars scattered across the bridge of his nose.

Eventually, he fell into that hazy space between waking and sleep. He could feel the warm blankets draped over his body and the plush pillow cradling his head, but he was lost in half-dreams that danced across the backs of his eyes. Flashes of color and sound—memories and imagination.

*A flash of pink. Niki's screams as she begged them not to leave her behind.*

*Silver bark shimmering against the light of flames. The sound of an explosion from an airship above.*

*Blue pinpricks of light scattered across a dark wall. Tommy's terrified gasps and his heart pounding against Wilbur's back as he hid behind him.*

*A whispered question. "How are we supposed to sleep after that?"*

*The taste of salt on his lips from his own tears. Stifled sobs spilling out from behind the hand he had pressed to his own mouth.*

*A knock on a-*



Wait, knocking?

Jolting awake, Wilbur's heart slammed against his ribs as he instinctively reached for the empty side of his bed. His hand only touched cool blankets, and his chest ached when he remembered that he was alone.

His head was throbbing. Anxiety thrummed through his veins, and Wilbur gasped to try and force air into his lungs.

The knocking repeated itself, more urgently this time.

Coming back to himself, Wilbur stared at the teal blanket draped over his legs, before glancing towards the door. A clock told him it was the middle of the night, and Wilbur's sleep-addled thoughts only supported that claim.

Who the fuck was knocking on his door at this time of night?

Trying to shove down the anxiety buzzing under his skin, Wilbur pushed the blankets off his legs and stumbled over to the door. In his half-asleep state, he didn't even think about pressing the button to open it, and wasn't prepared in any way for what was waiting on the other side. Or rather, *who*.

For a moment, Wilbur wondered if he was still dreaming. If he'd actually slipped into proper sleep, and now he was having a hyper-realistic dream specifically designed to torment him even worse than his memories did.

It had to be a dream. There couldn't be another explanation. Because there was no reason for Tommy to be standing outside his bedroom door in the dead of night.

"I- I'm dreaming," Wilbur stammered, blinking a few times at Tommy.

Tommy narrowed his eyes. "You're not, but if it makes you feel better you can tell yourself that," he said, his own voice strangely hoarse.

The two stared at each other for a few moments in silence. Wilbur's eyes darted around Tommy's face—his washed out blue eyes, the faint glow of his freckles in the dim hallway, the hands he had curled into fists at his sides—and the realization slowly dawned on him that this wasn't a dream. That the cold stone under his feet and the teenage boy standing in front of him were both real.

"What are you doing here?" Wilbur whispered, his heart rate picking up his chest.

Tommy opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated before closing it again. His eyes darted around Wilbur's face, before looking him up and down, as if he hadn't seen Wilbur in ages. Even in the gloom, Wilbur could make out the way his shoulders were shaking—like it was taking every ounce of willpower to keep himself standing straight.

Another beat passed.

“Nothing,” Tommy suddenly snapped, turning on his heel and walking away from the door.  
“This never fucking happened.”

For a second, Wilbur was too shocked to do anything but stare at Tommy’s back as it quickly retreated down the hall.

Then, he was running.

“Wait, come back here!” Wilbur said, stumbling over his half-asleep legs to catch up with Tommy.

Tommy stopped, back turned to Wilbur as he stared down the empty hallway. It wasn’t just his shoulders that were shaking. It was his entire body.

“What do you want?” Tommy asked, not looking at Wilbur.

Wilbur blinked. “What do *I* want? You’re the one who showed up at my room in the middle of the fucking night!”

“Yeah, and I said it was nothing,” Tommy repeated, although his words were far weaker this time.

He still wasn’t looking at Wilbur. The shaking was getting worse.

The waves started up again, but instead of drowning out every sound around him, it was just drowning *him*.

“You came here for a reason,” Wilbur pointed out, wincing as the taste of salt sat heavy on his tongue.

Another moment.

“I just needed to check something. But I’m leaving now, so go back to sleep.”

Tommy said it like it was supposed to be an insult. Like there was supposed to be a bite to his words that left gouges in Wilbur’s skin and drew even more blood than what was already staining his entire body. But... there was no bite. There was no razor’s edge to his voice.

If anything, Tommy sounded tired. Tired and pleading. Like he was begging Wilbur not to push this.

And Wilbur-

Wilbur recognized what was going on.

The shaking. The exhaustion. The way his eyes had darted up and down Wilbur’s entire body, like he had been searching for an injury.

“You’re having them too,” Wilbur whispered, his voice trembling. “The nightmares.”

Tommy flinched like he'd been hit, and whirled around so Wilbur could see his face again.

The fear lining Tommy's face was both wholly unrecognizable, and far too familiar for Wilbur's liking.

"You- You too?" Tommy asked, his voice cracking.

There was too much saltwater in Wilbur's throat for him to respond, so he just nodded, and some of the fear faded from Tommy's face.

"I just-" his breathing hitched, and he took a step closer to Wilbur. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I just had to make sure-"

"I was alive," Wilbur finished for him, his heart pounding in his ears. "You were making sure I was alive."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Tommy nodded. "I had a dream that- that you-" a shudder, "I watched you die." He paused. "Every goddamn night my brain comes up with some new fucked up way for you to die, and usually I can just tell myself that you're fine, that someone would tell me if you- if anything happened, but tonight I don't know. I just couldn't calm down until I made sure."

Every night.

Every night, Tommy had been seeing Wilbur die in his dreams.

Every night, Tommy had to remind himself that Wilbur was alive.

Every night, Tommy had dealt with that all on his own.

Until now.

The weight of Tommy's confession took a few moments to sink in. Because his words meant *far* more than just saying that he was having nightmares. His nightmares were about Wilbur dying. He was terrified of a world where Wilbur wasn't around.

Tommy cared. Tommy still wanted him around.

Wilbur couldn't breathe. The water was choking him, filling up his lungs and rushing through the hole in his chest until every molecule was filled with frigid saltwater. His lungs ached and his eyes burned, because his little brother still cared about him.

"I- I thought-" Wilbur couldn't seem to force the words out, and he took a shuddering breath as his legs shook underneath him.

The fear and pain on Tommy's face was quickly replaced with worry, and he rushed forward, stopping only a few feet away from Wilbur as he watched him slowly crumble. "Wil? What's going on?"

“I thought you didn’t care!” Wilbur forced out, wrapping his arms around himself as he fought to fill his lungs.

Tommy’s eyes widened. A second passed. And then another.

“What?”

The whispered question was like a shout in the hallway.

“You called me a bastard.”

“I- I know but-” Tommy paused, brows furrowing, “I was just pissed! I was pissed and saying stupid shit! It didn’t mean anything, of course I fucking care about you!”

...he didn’t know.

This entire time, Wilbur had thought that Tommy knew exactly what he was doing when he called Wilbur a bastard. The bridge he was breaking down between them. But in Tommy’s mind, he’d just been throwing out another insult. All the implications of his words—he hadn’t thought about it like that.

It had just been an insult. Not disowning.

Tommy should’ve known. But Wilbur could read his little brother better than anyone, and there was no lie written on his face. The confusion dancing across his eyes was genuine. *He didn’t understand.*

And Wilbur had responded by calling him by his title, before walking out on him. From there, he’d moved to the personal wing of the palace, and ran away the one time Tommy saw him outside the training room. The only time they spoke after the fight was at the negotiations, and Wilbur continuously refused to call him by his name while calling the Emperor by a nickname, wore the colors of the Antarctic Empire, and insisted that this was what Tommy had wanted. Not to deal with him anymore.

No wonder Tommy had said that Wilbur turned his back on him. That’s exactly what it looked like from his point of view.

Tommy never stopped caring. And Wilbur had been too caught up in his own problems to realize they were on completely different wavelengths.

His lungs refused to fill with air. Spots danced around his vision, and Wilbur was struggling to hold himself up. There was too much going on. The waves were crashing and his thoughts were racing as the realizations stacked on top of each other.

“Wilbur?” Tommy was at his side now, and he reached out, desperate to grab onto something to hold him up. “Wilbur, are you okay?”

Wilbur shook his head. He was drowning again. He’d been sitting at the bottom of the ocean for so long, but he was drowning again and again and again-

“Fuck, hang on-” A warm hand wrapped around his own, and Wilbur nearly collapsed into Tommy’s side as he dragged him out of the hallway.

They stumbled back into his room, the door hissing shut behind them as Tommy tugged him towards the bed. Once they were sitting, Tommy grabbed his other hand, and squeezed both of them as tightly as he could.

“You’re a fucking idiot for thinking I didn’t care,” he hissed in between squeezing his fingers. “One fight? You seriously think one fight is all it would take for me to stop giving a shit about you?”

Wilbur’s eyes were burning again. His vision was blurring, and his lungs ached as the saltwater engulfed him.

“It’s not- It’s not just one fight,” Wilbur forced out, his voice thick. “This entire fucking time- I’ve been awful to you, Tommy. And I knew I was being a prick but- but I was just so *scared*.”

Tommy stopped squeezing his fingers, but he didn’t let go.

“You were scared?”

Wilbur nodded, squeezing his eyes shut again. “I’ve been scared shitless nearly every day since we got here. I was scared we were going to get killed, and then I was scared we were going to be betrayed again, and more than anything I was scared we were going to lose Eldingvegr and that- that you’d hate me for it.”

“I don’t understand. Why would I hate you for something like that? You’re not a fucking god, Wilbur. I’m the one negotiating for our planet. If anything, it’d be my fault if we lost it.”

“But I’m supposed to be your advisor,” Wilbur argued, shaking his head. “I’m your guide. I’m the one who is supposed to help you make all the right decisions but- but I don’t know what the right decision is anymore! I don’t fucking know how to do this! I’ve never been in real negotiations before so I just- I panicked and thought we couldn’t trust anyone. Because if we didn’t trust anyone, we couldn’t be betrayed again.”

Tommy was silent for a moment. The hands holding his let go, and Wilbur flinched at how cold the air was against his skin. But before he could curl away, there were hands grabbing his face, and Wilbur was forced to look up and meet Tommy’s eyes.

“Wilbur,” Tommy said in a low voice, “yes, you’re supposed to be my advisor, but I couldn’t give less of a shit about how good you are at it. You could’ve been the worst goddamn advisor in the world and it wouldn’t matter. Because I just needed *you*.”

And after months of fighting back the burning in his eyes, of forcing down sobs time and time again because he knew that if he let one tear fall, he’d fall apart completely-

He broke.

A strangled sob forced its way out of his throat as hot tears spilled down his cheeks. His head was still spinning and his heart was still racing, and he couldn't breathe in the slightest as a monstrous, panicked thing began to tear away inside his chest.

He tipped forward, burying his face in Tommy's chest as he let out a mangled sob. Everything he'd been holding in the past few months came flooding to the front of his mind—his fear, his anger, his anxiety, his pain—it was drowning him over and over again. He fought for air as he began to cry harder, but he couldn't get himself to stop.

"I- I'm sorry," he gasped between sobs.

Arms wrapped around him, hugging him so tightly, it was only making it harder to breathe. But he didn't care. He'd missed this more than anything. This closeness with his little brother. There was no more ice between them. It had all melted away, and all that was left were the tears pooling around them.

His head was spinning from lack of oxygen. The waves were still crashing and he still couldn't breathe, but he couldn't move away from Tommy. His head began to grow fuzzy, and there was a faint ringing echoing over the waves.

"Wil, you need to breathe," Tommy said, stammering like he was crying too. "You're gonna fucking- you're gonna pass out if you don't breathe."

But he couldn't stop crying. He couldn't take a breath because his body wouldn't let him. He was still drowning and he had no idea which way to swim to get to the surface.

"Wil—" Tommy pushed him away from his chest, putting both hands on his shoulders to force him to meet his eyes. Through the tears, Wilbur could see that Tommy was crying too, though far less violently than Wilbur was. "You need to try and breathe with me, okay?"

There were black spots dancing around his vision now, and Wilbur's head was pounding as he wheezed for air.

"Oh- Okay."

Tommy's own breath stuttered as he forced in a lungful of air, but he was able to puff out his chest, one hand clenching and unclenching as he did so. Wilbur tried to mimic him, but he barely got a gasp in before another sob bubbled up.

Still, they kept trying. Tommy's own tears dried up, and while Wilbur's didn't, he kept forcing air into his lungs despite how little they seemed to want to keep in. The saltwater was everywhere, but he tried to stop fighting against it. To accept it like he had before.

Water filled his lungs, and poured out once again. The breaths got easier. The ache in his lungs began to fade.

It didn't work completely. His breaths were still stuttering as tears poured down his cheeks, but the black dots had disappeared. And that was good enough for him as he buried his face

in his little brother's shoulder, wanting nothing more than to hide away from the *everything* going on in his mind.

Tommy didn't say anything else. Instead, he just hugged Wilbur as tightly as Wilbur hugged him, resting his chin on top of Wilbur's head and playing with the ends of his hair.

It took an embarrassingly long time for Wilbur to realize that their positions had switched—in the past when Tommy was upset, Wilbur would hold him close to his chest, resting a chin on top of his head and playing with his hair until he calmed down. And part of him was saying that he should pull away. That it wasn't Tommy's job to be the one comforting him.

But Wilbur had pulled away from Tommy far too many times over the past few months. And besides, Tommy wasn't complaining. If anything, he seemed more relaxed than he'd been in ages, slumped against the pillows and humming under his breath as Wilbur's tears began to slow.

Finally, the waves quieted down in his ears, and he could hear his own thoughts again. His eyes were sore, and he was so exhausted, it was as if his very bones wanted to sink down into his mattress.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with... that," Wilbur said after a while, wincing at how utterly wrecked his voice was.

The hand playing with his hair paused, and Tommy frowned at him. "No."

Wilbur blinked. "What?"

"I said no. You have a lot to apologize to me for, and I probably owe you some apologies too, but not for this. You're not fucking saying sorry for this," Tommy scolded him, although his voice was low. "Do you trust me, yes or no?"

While Wilbur hated that it was even a question Tommy had to ask, he knew it was his own fault, but didn't hesitate when giving his answer.

"Yes."

Tommy let out a sigh of relief. "Then trust me enough to let me help you, Wil. Please."

*Oh.*

Wilbur thought he didn't have any tears left in his system, but his vision blurred again as he rested his head in the crook of his little brother's shoulder. "Okay." A shudder ran down his spine. "Okay, can I tell you something then?"

Resting his head against the pillow again, Tommy nodded. "Go for it."

Blinking away the fresh wave of tears, Wilbur readjusted so he was curled into Tommy's side, staring at the starry canopy above their heads.

“I don’t-” his breathing hitched, “I don’t think I know who I am anymore. Because I’ve spent my whole life being told I need to be your advisor, but outside of that I just- I don’t feel like I’m a person. And it- it scares me, Tom.”

There was a moment of silence as Tommy considered this, having resumed playing with the ends of Wilbur’s hair in a way that perfectly soothed the throbbing in his temples.

“Well, you’re my brother, for starters,” Tommy said quietly, letting out a soft laugh. “I think that’s a better title than just being a stupid fucking advisor.”

Wilbur chuckled. “Yeah, I think I like that a bit better too.”

“Seriously though, I don’t get why you think you need to, like, know who you are right now and all that shit. Like, I dunno who I am. I’m supposed to be a King one day, but do you think I know what the fuck that means? No, I don’t. But I’m pretty sure I’ll just figure it out as I go, y’know?”

“I don’t get how you can do that,” Wilbur confessed. “How you can just... choose not to worry about stuff.”

“I think that’s just because you’re a really anxious person, Wil,” Tommy teased.

“Yeah,” Wilbur snorted, “can’t argue with that one. I’m anxious, like, all the time.”

“Are you anxious right now?”

Wilbur had to pause at that question. Because he’d grown so used to feeling a near constant low level hum of anxiety in the background of everything he did, it actually took him a moment to realize that it wasn’t there anymore. There was still a hint of it. A nearly silent hum in the back of his mind that told him it was going to come back. But for right now... it was gone.

“No, I think I cried all of it out for the moment.”

Tommy huffed. “The manliest of men cry all the time. That’s what Foolish told me.”

Wilbur smiled into Tommy’s shoulder. “Did he now?”

“Yup. Which is why you should stop being a little bitch and cry more often.”

“You’re a strange child,” Wilbur teased, reaching up to flick Tommy’s forehead.

“Hey! I’m not a child!” Tommy smacked his hand away, and Wilbur giggled when he ducked his face into Tommy’s shoulder to hide from his retaliation.

Instead of shoving him away from his shoulder, Tommy smacked his arm a few times, before giving up and slumping back against the pillows.

A few minutes passed by in silence. The last of the burning disappeared from Wilbur’s eyes, and he relished in the fact that this was the quietest his head had been in months.



But then,

“Are we going to talk about it?” Tommy asked, his voice low. “All the shit you’ve been keeping from me the past few months?”

Wilbur winced, but forced himself to nod. “Yeah, we will. I know I owe you a lot of explanations-”

“I owe you some too,” Tommy cut in.

“Not tonight though,” Wilbur continued, figuring he and Tommy could deal with the specifics when they got down to it. “I’m too tired to do it tonight.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Tommy muttered, dragging his free hand down his face. “I’m way too goddamn tired.”

“We’re in agreement then,” Wilbur hummed.

Tommy nodded. “Yup. No need for more emotional shit tonight.”

This made Wilbur chuckle, and another minute passed in silence.

“Do you have any water in here?” Tommy suddenly asked. “Like, as tired as I am, I’m really fucking thirsty too.”

Actually, now that Tommy mentioned it, he realized he was also insanely thirsty. Which made sense, considering he probably cried half of his body’s water supply onto Tommy’s shirt. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton, and his head was throbbing in a way that Wilbur knew would only get worse unless he got some water in his system.

“No, I don’t have any water in here, and I’m pretty sure the servants are asleep,” Wilbur groaned, wincing as he pulled away from Tommy. “That means we gotta go get the water ourselves.”

Tommy gaped. “Seriously?”

Wilbur rolled his eyes, and reached out to ruffle his little brother’s hair. “Yes, seriously. Servants won’t always be around to do your bidding, Your Highness.”

Although it was obvious that Wilbur was teasing him, Tommy flinched violently at the title, and Wilbur’s smile dropped as he pulled his hand away from Tommy’s head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like-”

“It’s okay,” Tommy said, cutting him off as he threw his legs over the side of the bed. “Just- don’t call me that again. Please.”

Wilbur nodded, pushing to his feet and stumbling when black dots swarmed his vision. He leaned into Tommy, who easily supported his weight until he was able to steady himself on his feet again.

Once he straightened up, Wilbur reached for Tommy's hand, and warmth rushed through him when Tommy took it without a second of hesitation.

"I won't call you by titles again," Wilbur promised, squeezing his fingers. "But you can't call me a bastard again. I know you might not understand it, but while I can deal with others calling me that, *you* saying it really hurt me, Tommy."

Tommy's brows pinched, and he nodded as he squeezed Wilbur's hand in return. "Okay. I won't call you that again."

It was almost laughable how simple it was. Just asking Tommy not to call him a bastard. Telling him upfront that it hurt him a lot to have Tommy use that against him. It's almost as if they could've been communicating like this the whole time.

Damn, they were stupid.

Keeping Tommy's hand wrapped tightly in his own, Wilbur led him out of the room and back into the hall. The stone was cool beneath his feet, and in the dim light, Wilbur thought the palace hall looked more peaceful than ever before.

There was still so much to think about. Like Phil's offer. Now that he and Tommy were... well, he wouldn't say they'd resolved everything, but they had made up for the most part, and negotiations with Eldingvegr could resume. This meant that he would need to talk with Tommy about Phil's offer, and figure out what that meant for them both.

Despite that looming over Wilbur's head though, he found that he wasn't dreading it. Maybe it was just the fact that he was still a bit out of it after his breakdown, but for the first time in a long time, he wasn't terrified of the near future.

The two of them shuffled silently down the hall and towards the kitchen. As they approached a corner though, there was the sound of voices up ahead, and Wilbur froze in place.

"You're getting better with a dagger, Ranboo." It was easy to recognize Techno's timbre, and Wilbur shared a wide-eyed look with Tommy.

"Oh, um, thank you. I've been practicing a lot with Tommy lately."

Techno snorted. "Yeah, the kid's got a knack for that sort of stuff, and a lot of anger to work through in the training room."

Ranboo let out an awkward laugh. "Yeah, the bruises on my back are kind of proof of that."

Wilbur raised an eyebrow at Tommy, silently asking if they should reveal themselves.

"Actually," Techno suddenly said before Tommy could respond, "speaking of, what did you talk with Orpheus about today?"

Tommy gave Wilbur a confused look, and Wilbur tensed, pulling Tommy back against the wall.

“Oh, yeah, we didn’t talk about much. I tried to ask him why he keeps calling Tommy Theseus, but I backtracked when he got a bit annoyed,” Ranboo explained, and something like dread began to crawl its way up Wilbur’s throat. “I ended up asking him if he had any tips for how to calm Tommy down if he’s, y’know, angry or upset about something. Because when Tommy took a nap the other day, he woke up screaming and I just- I didn’t know what to do, y’know?”

A pang echoed through Wilbur’s chest hearing that, and he squeezed Tommy’s hand, relieved when his brother squeezed right back.

“That’s a good idea. But I keep telling you, you gotta be careful with Orpheus. He’s a lot more skittish than Theseus,” Techno pointed out.

“I know that. I’ve been trying to befriend him since he got here like you told me to, Techno, but it’s way harder than it was with Tommy,” Ranboo said, and Wilbur’s brows pinched together. “He apologized to me the other day for saying we weren’t friends, so I think that’s a step in the right direction. But I don’t know. He still seems a bit wary of me and I don’t get why.”

Techno snorted. “Maybe because you suck at being subtle?”

“I- I try!” Ranboo protested, while a pit had formed in the bottom of Wilbur’s stomach. “Like, Tommy was easy! You told me to befriend him when he got here, and it was fine! But Orpheus-”

“Orpheus is a lot more suspicious than Theseus is, but don’t think that Theseus is stupid, because he’s not. He just gives people the benefit of the doubt,” Techno explained. “He’s complained to me about how nosy you are, which is, like, really awkward for me because then I gotta make excuses for you.”

“Wait, he complains about me?” Ranboo asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

Techno sighed. “Ranboo, you’ve literally been reporting to me about Theseus for months. You should feel lucky that he only thinks you’re nosy.” There was a pause. “Y’know, I know we talked about this before, but me and Theseus got a pretty good thing going. I don’t think I need you on this anymore-”

“No!” Ranboo cut in. “I can do it! I promise!”

“I’m not sayin’ you can’t. You obviously already did. I’m just saying it’s not super necessary at this point, especially since the negotiations are almost a done deal.”

“Okay, Theseus I get, but I can get through to Orpheus,” Ranboo argued. “I know it’s taken me a while, but I think he’s finally starting to trust me.”

“Ranboo, Phil and Orpheus have their whole thing going. I’ve already talked with Phil about this, and he doesn’t really think the two of us need to have our meetings with you anymore either.”

“Wouldn’t you rather have two perspectives though?” Ranboo tried. “I just- I want to prove that I can do it.”

There was another pause, and Wilbur felt like he was going to throw up.

“Fine. Keep trying with Orpheus, and report to me or Phil what he tells you. I just want updates on where his head is at with the negotiations, and also how close he is to patchin’ things up with Theseus.”

“Got it. I’ll do what I can.”

“Now get going, it’s really late and I have a meeting in the morning,” Techno said, and his footsteps began to fade.

“Alright. Sleep well, Techno!” Ranboo called out, his voice growing quieter as he presumably walked away.

“You too!”

The sounds of the two faded away, until the only thing Wilbur could hear was his and Tommy’s breathing. Nearly a minute of silence passed, and Wilbur felt like his feet were frozen to the ground.

Beside him, Tommy looked like he was on the verge of breaking down. The pit at the bottom of Wilbur’s stomach only grew larger as the full realization of what just happened sunk in.

He’d been right.

This entire fucking time, he’d been right.

And despite how long he waited for this, there was no satisfaction, no sense of triumph. Because Wilbur now realized that he never wanted his paranoia to be right.

But it was.

## Chapter End Notes

you guys. you guys have no idea how long I've been waiting for that ranboo reveal. like, I decided that bit about ranboo before I even started writing this fic. this is SO satisfying to finally reveal. anytime I've seen people talking about how sweet or genuine ranboo is in the comments, I understand you because I was purposefully trying to mislead you, but also I was laughing at every single comment like that I got

also THE BROTHERS HAVE MADE UP!! that's another scene I've had planned in my head for ages. of course things aren't resolved between them, but they're no longer hostile to each other so we have that!

now you all have to wait to find out how they react to this new information about ranboo, and in turn phil and techno :) suffice to say, phil and techno fucked up :)))

okay that's all for now!! because this is an insanely long chapter I don't know if I'll write another one before my trip on Friday, so if I don't, don't expect another update for this until after I'm back. I'll be gone ten days, so there'll be a short break for this fic. feel free to hop over to my tumblr though and check out my tag #the stars and their children to see a bunch of analysis discussion on the fic with my readers :)

please leave a comment telling me your thoughts!! so much happened this chapter, it's very very dense so feel free to scream into the void

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# truth is a bitter pill to swallow

## Chapter Summary

The brothers have to deal with what they now know.

## Chapter Notes

HI EVERYONE I'M BACK!!!

Not gonna lie, it took a lot longer than I expected to get this out. I got back from my trip last week, but alas couch surfing across the East Coast and also seeing Lovejoy in concert in a very crowded venue doesn't do wonders for the immune system (although the show was so damn worth it) so I got sick (not covid, just normal sickness ugh). So yeah that combined with a lot of other things meant that it took me a while to write this chapter even after I got back from my trip. Also, I'm still sick. The coughing is getting real annoying now.

BUT ANYWAY I'm so glad I was able to finish this!! I won't waste anymore time, I know you wanna see what happens so I hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur stumbled back into his room, blood roaring in his ears as he had to practically drag Tommy in behind him.

His head was spinning. His eyes were burning. Ranboo's voice kept echoing in his ears.

*"I've been trying to befriend him since he got here like you told me to, Techno."*

Like he'd been told to.

All those awkward smiles and stuttered apologies. His quiet attempts at asking Wilbur how he was doing. The way his voice cracked when he admitted that he thought the two of them could be friends.

It was a lie. Ranboo had never wanted to be his friend. At least, not of his own volition. He was only doing that because Techno had ordered him to.

That wasn't even the worst part though.

*"You've literally been reporting to me about Theseus for months."*

The friendship Ranboo had with both him and Tommy was never genuine. It was all a ploy to get information for Techno and Phil. There had always been something off about Ranboo's behavior that put Wilbur's paranoia on edge, but as of late, he'd been trying to chalk it up to the fact that he was just socially awkward. He'd pushed down the uncertainty in his gut, having been told over and over again by everyone around him that he was wrong. That his suspicions had no ground to stand on.

*Tommy* had told him that outright. That he was too paranoid for his own good.

Because Tommy was trusting. Fuck, he was so trusting, and Wilbur had always been worried that was going to be used against him.

...shit. Tommy.

"Tommy?" Wilbur whispered as soon as the door hissed shut behind them, turning to his little brother.

Tommy was standing in front of the door, head bowed and arms folded over his chest. His shoulders were trembling, and Wilbur took a careful step closer to him.

"Tom?" He tried again. "Are you okay?"

A shudder ran through him.

"No," he croaked out, his voice thick with unshed tears. "I'm not fucking okay."

Wilbur took another step towards him. Tommy didn't look up, and flinched violently when he rested a hand on his shoulder. As he pulled his hand away, Tommy spoke again.

"So are you gonna say 'I told you so'?" He asked, eyes still fixed on the floor. "B-Because you were right. This whole fucking time, you kept telling me that Ranboo- that he couldn't-" he cut himself off with a shaky breath. "You were right, and I was wrong. So lay it on me. Tell me I'm a fucking idiot."

Despite the fact that he was hiding his face from Wilbur's view, he could tell that Tommy was on the verge of sobbing. If he wasn't so hollowed out from his breakdown that had happened only a few minutes before, Wilbur had a feeling he'd be in a similar state.

"You're not an idiot," Wilbur whispered instead, reaching out again, and feeling relieved when Tommy didn't flinch away from the hand on his arm this time. "I didn't *want* to be right."

Another shudder from Tommy.

"But you were," he pointed out, his words so soft, Wilbur struggled to hear them.

Pressing his mouth into a thin line, Wilbur nodded. "I guess I was."

And that seemed to break Tommy.

A violent sob tore from his throat, and he launched himself at Wilbur, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and burying his face into his chest. His breaths came in stuttered gasps as he began to cry into Wilbur's shirt, and all Wilbur could do was wrap his arms around his back, tucking his little brother under his chin and holding him as tightly as he could to show him he was there.

"He betrayed me!" Tommy sobbed, his voice muffled. "I- I thought he was my friend but he wasn't! He fucking wasn't!"

"I'm so sorry, Tommy."

"I told him so much," Tommy confessed, clutching the fabric of Wilbur's shirt like it was a lifeline. "I'm so- he told all of that to fucking Techno! I should've known! Techno always seemed to know when I was pissed because of you or something and I didn't- I thought he was just good at reading me or something!"

"You see the best in people," Wilbur reminded him, trying to keep his tone as gentle as possible. "That's not a bad thing. I promise it's not."

Tommy stifled another sob into Wilbur's shirt, the pure anguish in his cries tearing Wilbur's heart in two. It was so reminiscent of that first night after the invasion, when they were hidden in the crawlspace and Tommy cried into his chest to muffle his voice.

Wilbur had never wanted to hear Tommy cry like that again. That was one of the things he'd been most afraid of this entire time. Tommy being hurt again, and Wilbur not being able to do anything to help him.

"I even-" Tommy gasped for air, dissolving into even more tears before he could get the words out. Wilbur ran his hand up and down Tommy's back, trying to calm him down just like he'd done for Wilbur only a few minutes before.

A beat passed. Then another.

The trembling slowly died down. Tommy lifted his head from Wilbur's shoulder, and he could see his little brother's eyes were bright red and swollen as could be.

"I even told him about Tubbo," he admitted, tears spilling down his cheeks.

*Oh.*

That was cruel. For Ranboo to know what Tommy had been through—how badly he'd been betrayed before—and still choose to spy on him?

The waves were back. They were crashing over and over again as anger rose in his gut once more.

"And Techno- fuck, I really thought- I dunno, maybe this was stupid, but I really thought he cared," Tommy whimpered, shoving his forehead against Wilbur's shoulder.

That made Wilbur pause.



Ranboo was one situation. He'd never befriended them of his own volition. He was a spy doing what he was told, to the point where he begged Techno to let him keep doing his job. While he could have some genuine care for Tommy inside of him, nothing about their friendship had ever been real.

But Techno and Phil... Wilbur didn't know what to think about them.

Techno had mentioned that Ranboo reported to both him and Phil, which meant Phil was fully aware of what Ranboo was doing. But up until very recently, Wilbur had divulged very little to Ranboo. Meaning that even if Ranboo had been reporting their conversations to Phil, he wouldn't have gotten very much from them anyway.

Besides, Wilbur had known Phil and Techno were getting reports on the two of them from people around the palace. Jack had outright admitted that he was supposed to be sending reports to Puffy, but told Wilbur he wasn't going to include anything more than vague information in them out of respect for him.

...shit. Was *that* real? Or had that been a sophisticated ploy on Jack's end to make Wilbur trust him more?

The waves grew louder as Wilbur struggled to take in a breath. Had everything been fake? His relationship with Jack? His relationship with *Phil*?

Wilbur had wanted to trust Phil. Phil offered to mentor him. Phil told him the way he'd been treated on Eldingvegr was wrong, and Wilbur had wanted to believe him.

Was it real? Or was it all part of Phil's plot to get Wilbur to agree to join the Empire?

Phil had always promised to be upfront with him, and up until now, he'd kept that promise. But now this revelation about Ranboo had thrown everything into question. It was entirely possible all of that had been real, and that Phil simply wanted to get extra information from Ranboo to know where Wilbur's head was at.

But... this was politics. No matter what Wilbur thought their personal relationship was like, he was still part of a planet that Phil wanted to claim for his Empire. Getting close to Wilbur was beneficial for the deal, especially because of the influence he had over Tommy. And that was only made easier by having a spy who could tell him exactly what his relationship with Tommy was like at any given moment.

The rest of that night was a haze. Wilbur eventually dragged Tommy back to his bed, and they fell into a fitful sleep curled around each other, just like they were little kids again.

Just like they were in the playroom, being hunted again.

When light crept in through the curtains, Wilbur was already awake. His head was pounding and his chest ached fiercely from all the tears and heartbreak of the night before. Tommy had been tossing and turning all night, and the blankets on the bed were twisted into a strange ball that barely covered either of their legs.

His head was pillowed on Tommy's stomach, and despite not being able to see his face, he could tell Tommy was also awake. He was playing with Wilbur's hair, like he needed something to occupy his hands to keep his nerves at bay. The tugging was surprisingly soothing for Wilbur's headache.

They sat there for several long minutes in silence. The light in the room got brighter, and Wilbur could hear the palace coming to life right outside his door.

By the time he and Tommy rolled out of bed, Jack would already be outside, waiting for Wilbur to get up so he could take him to breakfast. But that meant Jack would see that Tommy spent the night in Wilbur's room, and they would have to explain that they'd finally made up. And from there, they'd have to tell Phil and Techno that they'd reconciled after their fight as well, and there'd be no more barriers to them continuing the negotiations.

Right now, Wilbur didn't want to move forward with the negotiations. Not when he and Tommy were both still reeling over their revelation about Ranboo, and all the implications that could have.

"Wil?" Tommy whispered suddenly, his hands stilling. "Are you awake?"

Wilbur hummed, not looking up from where his eyes were fixed on the ceiling. "Yeah, I am."

A beat passed between them.

"What are we gonna do?" Tommy then asked, moving his hand away from Wilbur's head.

"I... I'm not sure," Wilbur confessed, focusing on the slow rise and fall of Tommy's abdomen under his head. "When Phil and Techno find out we're talking again, they're gonna want to resume negotiations."

Tommy made a worried noise. "You don't think we can ask for more time?"

"I dunno about you, but Techno's been on my ass reminding me that we can't put off the negotiations forever," Wilbur said, watching the way the canopy above his head shimmered in the morning light. "He said they can push things off while we work out our argument, but without that standing in the way..."

"Shit," Tommy muttered. "Yeah, he basically said the same thing to me too."

Another pause.

"I just don't know what I wanna do," Tommy then said, dragging a hand down his face. "I've been talking to Techno about potential contracts we'd draw up if Eldingvegr joins the Empire and all that shit and just- it didn't seem *bad*."

He took a shaky breath.

"It just- It seemed like he actually was being fair," Tommy said, his voice cracking. "Like he wasn't trying to trick me or- or fuck me over with the deal." His breathing hitched, and Wilbur winced as he listened to it rattle through Tommy's chest. "I can't trust him, can I?"

The answer should've been easy. Wilbur should've been able to tell Tommy *no*. No, he couldn't trust Techno. No, he couldn't trust anyone in the palace. Neither of them could.

But Wilbur thought back to Phil. He thought back to the soft way he would say *little bird* and the sensation of dark wings wrapping around him, keeping him safe.

And Wilbur wasn't sure.

"I don't know," he admitted, his words raspy.

Beneath him, Tommy stiffened.

"You don't know?"

Squeezing his eyes shut, Wilbur rolled over, burying his face into Tommy's shirt.

"I don't know what to think anymore."

Seconds ticked by. One after the other. The light grew brighter in the room, and Wilbur knew they were running out of time.

"I feel like I'm back there," Tommy then said, his voice barely audible. "Back in that fucking crawlspace hiding behind you, thinking that at any moment we're gonna get dragged out and killed."

Wilbur clenched his jaw. The same dread had been consuming him ever since he woke up. The feeling of something horrible looming right over their heads. That once they opened those doors, they could never go back.

"I don't think they'd kill us," Wilbur tried instead. "Even if they were lying about everything else, there'd be no reason for them to keep us alive this long if they just wanted to execute us in the end."

"I know that," Tommy quickly told him. "But, like, it's kind of an execution anyway, when you think about it. If we go out those doors and sign away our planet, there's no going back. All our power is in their hands. We're fucked, and there'll be no way out."

"Maybe," Wilbur acquiesced. "But again, it doesn't make sense why they'd go to all this trouble if they were just going to fuck us over in the end anyway."

"I fucking know, I just—" Tommy cut himself off with a groan, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. "What do we even do if we don't wanna join? It's not like we can just..."

Tommy trailed off into silence. Wilbur waited a few moments for him to continue, and when he didn't, he finally glanced up at his face to see his little brother staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, like a lightbulb had just gone off in his head.

"What if we left?"

...what?

“Left? To go where?” Wilbur asked, shifting off of Tommy so he could sit up properly.

“Away. Off of Zephyrs IV,” Tommy said, brows furrowed now as his eyes darted around the room. “We’re fucking trapped here, Wil. Don’t you see? We literally have no other option but to join because we can’t leave the planet unless we sign over Eldingvegr. But what if we left and went somewhere else?”

“Tommy, we came here because this is the only place that could protect us from Essempi,” Wilbur reminded him. “If we leave, Dream will hunt us down and kill us.”

“But what if we went somewhere else for protection?” Tommy tried, talking faster now. “Like- Like Floslium! Or the Badlands! We don’t have to totally cross out joining the Empire, but we can just, I dunno, get some space away from Phil and Techno so we can actually work out what the fuck we wanna do without all these goddamn eyes on us!”

Tommy’s words were starting to spill into each other the longer he spoke. His eyes were wild, fingers twisting into the blanket on his lap tightly enough to turn his skin purple. He was nervous. That much was clear. And his anxiety seemed to be rubbing off on Wilbur, because the longer he spoke, the louder the waves got in his ears again.

“You’re saying you wanna leave just temporarily?” Wilbur asked, struggling to understand.

“I- I don’t know,” Tommy stammered out. “I just- I don’t fucking know anymore, but I feel like I can’t breathe here. We don’t know how much Phil and Techno were lying to us, so we can’t trust them right now. And I definitely can’t trust Ranboo at all anymore.” He paused then, letting out a bitter scoff. “You know what the funny thing is?”

Wilbur frowned. “What?”

“Even though Tubbo nearly got us killed, I actually feel like what Ranboo did was worse,” he said, pulling his knees up to his chest. “At least Tubbo was genuinely my friend for a while. Ranboo never cared about me at all.”

His voice broke at the end of that, and he squeezed his eyes shut, taking another breath to steady himself. The small sounds of pain were like daggers straight to Wilbur’s heart, because Tommy just sounded so... resigned. Resigned in a way where it didn’t even sound like his little brother’s voice coming out of his mouth.

Before Wilbur could linger too much on that though, Tommy was speaking again.

“But if we stay, we have to go through with the negotiations and I’m not- I don’t think I’m ready for that. I need time to think.”

“We need to be really careful deciding if we wanna leave or not, because I don’t think that’s gonna be as easy as us just saying, ‘hey thanks for letting us stay here for a while, but we’re gonna head out now,’” Wilbur pointed out.

“Okay, so we need more time either way,” Tommy nodded, a crease forming between his brows. He considered this for a moment, still twisting his fingers into the blanket.

Then, another lightbulb went off above his head.

“Let’s not tell them we made up.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

It was such a simple solution, but it was strange to hear it coming out of Tommy’s mouth. While his brother was certainly one for mischief and pranks, true deception wasn’t in his nature. He was impulsive, and often said exactly what was on his mind. Lying wasn’t something he’d ever been good at, and yet here he was, suggesting that they outright lie to Phil and Techno.

In a way, it was almost like Wilbur was watching a stranger talk. A stranger that had possessed his little brother’s body. A stranger that was nervous, who curled his shoulders in and darted his eyes around like he was searching for a threat. A stranger that kept reaching for Wilbur’s hands but pulled back at the last minute, like he was going to float away if he didn’t find an anchor, but was too afraid to ask for it.

“Jack’s probably outside the door already,” Wilbur said, reaching for Tommy’s hand this time when he made another aborted move towards him. “You spent the night in my room. How are we going to explain that?”

A small bit of tension leaked from Tommy’s shoulders at the gesture, and he squeezed Wilbur’s fingers.

“I’ll say I woke up early and couldn’t go back to sleep, so I came over here to try and talk to you but we got into another argument,” Tommy explained, eyes still darting between Wilbur’s face and the door. “We’ll yell at each other and shit so Jack can overhear. Then I’ll leave, and I’ll see if I can talk to-” he winced, “to Ranboo and Techno. See what they’re both like and if I can pick up on either of their bullshit. You talk to Phil and try to see where his head is at. Then we’ll meet up again tonight and see what we wanna do.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Wilbur asked. “Will you be okay talking to Techno and Ranboo both on your own?”

At this, Tommy clenched his jaw and dropped his eyes to his lap. “I’ll be fine. I just gotta remember not to fall for their lies anymore.”

And a part of Wilbur wanted to agree. Because that’s what he’d been preaching this entire time. That Techno and Ranboo were filling Tommy’s head with lies. He should’ve been celebrating that his little brother had finally come around to his side.

Yet, his chest felt hollow. Because not only was this so unlike *his* Tommy, but Wilbur still wasn’t sure if it had all been lies. There was no more gut instinct to guide him here. That part of himself was silent as a war was waged inside himself.

His head was telling him Tommy was right. That he needed to assume that everything Phil had told him up until this point was a lie meant to manipulate him, and they had to get out before his judgement could be clouded even more than it already was.

But his heart... that was saying something else.

Only the day before, he had to stop himself from accepting Phil's offer right then and there. Now, he was debating whether he and Tommy could even stay on Zephys IV at all.

Tommy was right. They needed time to figure this out.

"Okay," Wilbur breathed, glancing down at the blankets around his legs. "Let's stage a fight."

There was a beat of silence as Tommy stared at him, a small, bitter smile hinted at in the corner of his lips. Then, he took a deep breath, and let go of Wilbur's hands to climb off the bed.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me Theseus?!" Tommy shouted as soon as he was on his feet, turning his head towards the door.

Wow, okay, they were jumping right into it then.

"You brought this on yourself!" Wilbur shouted in return, also standing up so they were face to face.

"Oh, because I 'betrayed' you?" Tommy asked mockingly, inching towards the door. "Says the one sleeping in the Emperor's wing of the palace, wearing a fancy fucking coat and cozying up with him like you two are best friends!"

Despite the fact that Wilbur knew this was a fake fight, there were still grains of truth in what Tommy was saying. Things they hadn't gotten the chance to properly address. It wasn't difficult to hear that in Tommy's anger, and all Wilbur could do was try his best not to flinch at it.

"What, are you jealous? Why don't you go run and tell Technoblade all about how cruel I'm being. It wouldn't be the first time you've bitched to him about me!" He yelled back.

At this, Tommy winced, and Wilbur clenched his jaw.

"I'm sorry," he quickly whispered, glancing at the door to the bedroom. "I didn't mean-"

"It's okay," Tommy whispered back, smoothing out his expression as he took a step towards Wilbur. "You're doing good." He took another deep breath and glanced at the door again.

"Then stop giving me so much to bitch about!"

They were right in front of the door to the bedroom now. If Jack was outside, there was no way he wouldn't at least be able to hear their muffled shouts.

"You call it bitching, I call it learning how to act like a fucking adult!" Wilbur shot back.

When Tommy winced again, pain radiated through Wilbur's chest. He closed the gap between them, wrapping Tommy in a quick hug and ducking down to whisper in his ear,

"I swear I'm just saying this to-"

"It's okay," Tommy reassured him again. "I'll come back here tonight and we'll figure things out. Does that sound good?"

Wilbur nodded. "Yes, that's fine."

"Okay. Then I'm sorry for this."

Then, before Wilbur could ask what Tommy meant by that, his little brother was shoving him back with such violent force, he almost lost his footing. He barely managed to catch himself as he stumbled back, his shoulders stinging where Tommy had slammed his hands into them.

"Get the FUCK away from me!" Tommy screamed loud enough that his words felt like a literal slap to the face.

As soon as the words left his mouth though, his twisted scowl disappeared again, and he gave Wilbur a small nod. And with that, he turned on his heel and stormed towards the door, not looking back again as he ran out and down the hallway.

Wilbur's chest stung, and the shock on his face felt like anything but an act as he stumbled out of his room after Tommy. He watched Tommy practically run down the hall, and although it felt like such an eerie parallel to the night before, this time Wilbur had to remind himself to stay rooted in place and not go after him.

Tommy turned the corner, and just like that he was gone.

Just like that, it was as if the night before had never happened. The truth only existed in both his and Tommy's memories.

Wilbur was frozen for a few moments, staring at the spot where Tommy had disappeared around the corner of the hall. He knew it was an act. He *knew* this. But fuck, it still hurt to hear Tommy's anger and know that just the night before, it had been completely genuine.

Suddenly, a voice startled Wilbur out of his shock.

"What the fuck was that?"

Turning, Wilbur saw Jack standing in his usual spot right across from his door. His brows were furrowed, and he was glancing between Wilbur and the hall where Tommy had disappeared.

"Isn't it self-explanatory?" Wilbur scoffed, trying to sound as tired as possible in the hopes that it would make the lie sound more genuine.

"No, it's not," Jack said, taking a step towards Wilbur. "Are you okay? Why was Theseus in your room?"

...Wilbur couldn't tell if the concern in Jack's voice was real or not. He focused on the guard's face, searching for any hint of deception in his mismatched eyes. If anything though, that only made Wilbur's worry worse, because there were no alarm bells ringing in his head. Jack *seemed* genuine. But Wilbur had no idea if he could trust his own judgement or not.

"He came by here really early this morning," Wilbur explained, dragging a hand down his face so he could avoid meeting Jack's eyes. "He wanted us to talk—wanted us to try and make up. But obviously that didn't fucking work."

Jack frowned, looking back down the hall again with a crease between his brows. "Are you sure you're okay, Wil?" He asked, quieter this time.

Guilt wormed its way up Wilbur's throat, threatening to choke him as he listened to the worry dripping from Jack's words.

"I'm... fine," Wilbur lied, turning to head back to his room. "I'm gonna go get dressed, and then we can go to breakfast."

He let the door to his room hiss shut behind him before he could hear Jack's reply.

A few minutes later, Wilbur found himself having slipped back into his routine like he'd never left it. He walked down the hall of the personal wing, Jack right at his heels as they made their way towards the dining room for breakfast. His boots clicked against the marble floor, and his coat brushed against his calves with every step. It was almost too easy for Wilbur to pretend that the night before hadn't happened. That he and Tommy were still fighting, and that he was oblivious to the lies he was being wrapped in by the people around him.

Jack kept frowning at him, and Wilbur couldn't tell if it was because he was worried, or because he hadn't told Jack the details of his 'fight' with Tommy. If Jack was a spy like Ranboo, wouldn't he be trying to push to find out what they talked about? But then again, Jack had never been the type to push for information. Wilbur had offered it up freely. Was that all part of Jack's design, or did he genuinely just want to be there for Wilbur if he needed it?

He didn't know. Right when he thought he'd been getting a grip on his life in the palace, the waves rose up again, and he was left to flail helplessly against the turbulent waves.

They made it to the dining room. He stood outside the archway, counting his breaths in his head as he tried to prepare himself for the conversation that awaited him. Because Phil was sitting at that table. Phil, who only yesterday had told Wilbur he deserved better, and made Wilbur want to believe him.

And a part of Wilbur still wanted to. But he knew he couldn't. Not right now.

His paranoia was back in full force. A prickling under his skin he'd finally managed to put to rest, and now it had returned stronger than ever. Wilbur felt like all eyes were on him as he forced himself to step into the dining room, and he had to fight not to hunch his shoulders under their knowing gazes.



“Morning mate.”

Phil’s voice echoed in the dining room, and Wilbur suppressed a flinch as he sat down in his usual spot next to Phil at the table.

“Morning Phil,” Wilbur murmured, keeping his eyes on the table as a servant set his breakfast plate in front of him.

Even without looking up to see his face, Wilbur could feel Phil’s mood shift.

“Is everything alright?” Phil asked, setting down his fork.

No, Wilbur wasn’t alright. So many questions sat on the tip of his tongue, straining to slip out so Wilbur could beg for the answers he was so desperate for.

*What is this?*

*Is this just part of your game?*

*Do you care about me?*

*...could you ever care about me?*

He swallowed down the words with a sip of his water.

“To- Theseus visited my room this morning,” Wilbur said instead, forcing himself to use Tommy’s formal name again. “He wanted to try and resolve things, but we got into another argument instead.”

“Oh.”

There was a beat of silence as Phil considered this, and Wilbur kept his eyes on his plate, knowing Phil would take any sign of nervousness as him just being upset about Tommy.

“Was it similar to what you argued about during the negotiations?” Phil then asked, folding his hands in front of him.

Wilbur shrugged. “Pretty much. You know how we’ve been.”

It was better to keep it vague. It wasn’t unreasonable to assume Wilbur wouldn’t want to talk about it, so he was going to rely on that right now. If he went into too much detail, he risked contradicting himself. Phil could fill in the blanks himself.

Another minute passed in silence. Phil lifted his hand, resting it on the back of Wilbur’s neck and giving it a reassuring squeeze. Wilbur couldn’t stop himself from leaning into the touch, the guilt twisting his insides again as he tried and failed at reminding himself that this could all be an act.

“You’ll work things out soon,” Phil told him softly. “Soon this will all be behind you two, and you’ll probably look back and laugh at how stubborn you both were.”

Yes, they were both stubborn. But there'd been no laughter the night before. If anything, Wilbur's eyes still burned from all the tears he shed into Tommy's shirt. It was a miracle they weren't bright red this morning.

"I'm still thinking about your offer," Wilbur said suddenly, desperate to change the subject from the 'fight' he had with Tommy.

Phil blinked. "Is that so?"

Wilbur nodded, head drooping slightly when Phil began to rub small circles into the back of his neck again. "Yeah. Just thinking about it."

"That's fine. I want you to take your time with it," Phil reassured him. "You'll have plenty of time to think it over once the negotiations are settled."

And that-

That made Wilbur stiffen.

The hand on the back of his neck was no longer a comfort, but a threat. A reminder that at any second, Phil could wrap that hand around his throat and choke him. That despite the choice Phil was presenting to him, there was no real 'choice' for him and Tommy.

Phil assumed that when the negotiations were over, they'll have joined the Empire. And at this point, they were in a position where they really didn't have another option. At least not while they were on Zephys IV.

Not while Wilbur was, quite literally, under Phil's thumb.

Gritting his teeth, he straightened up in his seat, relieved when Phil pulled his hand back.

"Yes, I'm sure we will," Wilbur forced out, picking up his fork to start eating his breakfast as his heart pounded in his chest. Thankfully, Phil didn't seem to notice the tension lining Wilbur's shoulders as he also turned back to his meal.

The rest of breakfast passed by in a blur.

Wilbur found himself watching Phil whenever the man's head was turned the other way. His eyes lingered on the lines of Phil's face, or the way his wings rustled every few minutes like clockwork.

Was that a smirk playing on the corners of his lips, or was it just Wilbur's imagination? Was there a knowing glint in Phil's icy eyes, or was that just the reflection of the lights above their heads?

When Phil smiled at him, was it just because he was enjoying eating breakfast with him, or was it because he knew he had the upper hand? Wilbur remembered that Phil had once mentioned how an Elytrian might tuck their wings into their back to hide their emotions, but how they could also learn how to not let their wings give away their thoughts so easily.

The black wings brushing against the floor were not tucked into Phil's back. They were relaxed, dark feathers glimmering like the night sky itself. At one point, Phil's eyes flickered to Wilbur again, and he had to pretend he'd been staring at his plate the entire time. But from his peripheral vision he could see his wings reaching out, almost as if they were trying to stretch towards Wilbur. But then, the stretching stopped, and they returned back to their normal positions.

His head was starting to hurt from theorizing about every little move Phil made.

During the rest of the meal, Phil tried to talk to Wilbur some more about random, inconsequential things—weather patterns and new books—but gave up when it became obvious that he wasn't in the right headspace to hold a conversation. Instead, they finished their food in silence. A silence that was probably comfortable to Phil, but weighed down Wilbur's shoulders and wrapped around his throat like an invisible albatross.

Relief washed over Wilbur when he saw that Phil's plate was empty. He watched Phil push to his feet, wings rustling with the movement as he glanced between Wilbur and the archway leading out of the dining room.

"If you need to come talk, you know where I am," Phil said gently, hand grazing over Wilbur's back as he passed by his chair. The warmth was fleeting. It was there for a split second, and then it was gone just as quickly.

Phil's footsteps faded as he left the dining room. Wilbur waited several minutes before looking up from his plate, finding himself alone at the table with no evidence that Phil had ever been there in the first place. His plate had been cleaned up the minute he'd left, and the table suddenly felt far too large to be sitting alone at.

The guard's eyes lingered on his back as he stood up from his chair, despite the fact that his plate was still half full. His skin was still prickling. A dark part of his mind wondered if peeling it off would finally make it go away.

Wandering out of the dining room, Wilbur found himself at a loss for what to do. He needed to think over their options. But how was he supposed to do that with so many eyes on him? Even if he went to his room, he knew the prickling would still be there. The paranoia had settled itself so deeply into his bones, it was setting all his nerve endings on fire.

What a strange contrast, to feel as though he was being doused with saltwater and burning at the same time. The waves were endless as they trapped him in their push and pull. In a way, he'd grown numb to the maelstrom. After so long, it was overwhelming to be right. Especially when all Wilbur could think was how badly he wished he'd been wrong.

Wilbur didn't speak much to Jack that day. In fact, he didn't speak much to anyone. He tried to hide away in the library and bury his anxieties in books, but he could barely focus enough to read a single page. Questions circled his mind like vultures looking for carrion. But there were still no answers to be found.

Late in the afternoon, Wilbur left the library. He'd spent most of his time there staring at the wall, mulling over their options in his head. When it became clear that he was just repeating

the same points over and over to himself though, he gave up, accepting that he wasn't going to get any further until he got a chance to speak to Tommy again.

Jack led him out of the library, back towards the personal wing. But before the doors were even in sight, Wilbur found himself running into possibly the last person he wanted to see today.

"Oh, Orpheus! I was looking for you," Ranboo said, rushing towards him as soon as he and Jack rounded the corner.

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur schooled his face into a mask of neutrality. "What for?"

He was surprised by how level his voice was. Just seeing Ranboo's face was enough to send the waves crashing again, especially as he thought back to Tommy's tears from the night before.

"I just wanted to see if you'd talked to Tommy this morning," Ranboo explained, jolting Wilbur in surprise.

Did... Did he know that he and Tommy made up? How could he know? No one was around when Tommy went to Wilbur's room the night before. The hallway had been empty, and if Ranboo somehow *had* been around, then he would've reported their reconciliation to Phil. Right?

Fuck. Maybe Phil and Techno both knew that he and Tommy had made up, but weren't telling them that they knew. Maybe they wanted to see how long he and Tommy would lie to them. Maybe this was all a test. Maybe-

"No, why?" Wilbur forced out before his thoughts could spiral into complete disarray.

Ranboo furrowed his brows, eyes dropping to the floor. "Shoot. I figured you hadn't but I was just wondering because I- I think he's mad at me."

Wilbur's spinning thoughts began to slow.

"Why do you think he's mad at you?" Wilbur asked, folding his arms behind his back.

"I don't know. I don't remember doing anything to upset him but-" Ranboo bit his lip, dual-toned hands twisting in front of him. "He didn't come to breakfast this morning, so I got worried and went to check on him. But he just didn't seem to want to talk to me. Like, he kept snapping at me and I just don't know what I did wrong."

Oh thank fuck. That made a lot more sense. Of course Ranboo was going to pick up on Tommy's sudden coldness to him. It was part of his job to be attuned to both his and Wilbur's moods after all.

Now, Wilbur had a choice. While he was tempted to pretend to be completely oblivious, Jack and Phil both knew about his and Tommy's most recent 'fight'. From what he could tell, Ranboo hadn't been told about this yet, but the information would get to him sooner or later. If he learned about it after this conversation, he'd wonder why Wilbur didn't bring it up.

Ranboo would probably assume it was because Wilbur had stopped trusting him again. The night before, he'd told Techno he thought he was getting through to Wilbur. That meant that right now, Wilbur had the upper hand. He didn't trust Ranboo, but Ranboo thought he did.

This was an opportunity Wilbur couldn't waste.

"That's... unfortunate," Wilbur said, making sure to be careful with his words. "That might actually have something to do with me, because I technically did talk to him this morning, but it was early," he explained, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"You did?" Ranboo frowned.

Wilbur nodded. "He couldn't sleep, so he came to my room early this morning to try and talk things out. But, uh, we just ended up getting into another argument."

Understanding dawned over Ranboo's face. "Oh. That makes sense."

Oh, yeah, Wilbur was sure it did.

"What did you guys fight about?" He asked after another moment.

Now that Wilbur knew the reason behind Ranboo's nosiness, he couldn't help but almost be awed by how bad he was at being subtle. Maybe that was an advantage. Despite how blatantly Ranboo pushed for information, Wilbur had actually started to let his guard down around him. He convinced himself that Ranboo was just socially awkward. Because a spy wouldn't be as obvious as he was.

And that's what worked to Ranboo's favor. He was so blatant about digging for information, it almost seemed ridiculous to think there could be nefarious intent behind it.

It sickened Wilbur to think about now.

"Just... the same shit Tommy was pissed about before. With me staying in the personal wing and all," Wilbur lied, twisting his fingers into the lining of his coat pockets. "He thinks I'm a hypocrite."

Ranboo considered this for a moment, still wringing his hands together as his hair fell over his eyes.

"Can I ask you something personal, Orpheus?"

Wilbur had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. "I can't promise I'll answer, but sure."

"How did you get so close with Phil?" He asked, blinking fast as he kept his eyes fixed on Wilbur's chin. "It just- it seemed like a switch flipped one day, and suddenly you were with Phil all the time."

Oh, that was a good one.

If Ranboo had asked this yesterday—if he had asked this before Wilbur knew the truth of his intentions—he probably would’ve choked at a question like this. Because Wilbur still wasn’t sure exactly how the shift between him and Phil happened. One day, all of their interactions had revolved around veiled threats and complex word games that kept him in a near constant state of anxiety. Then, something flipped, and Wilbur found himself seeking Phil out anytime he needed someone to talk to. He craved Phil’s guidance, and wanted to believe the promises hidden between his words. That he saw Wilbur as more than just an opportunity. That when he told Wilbur he had the potential for greatness, he meant it.

Wilbur had gone from analyzing every word that came out of Phil’s mouth for signs of a lie, to wanting to believe even the most inane truths. Truths that didn’t make sense. Truths that couldn’t be truths, but Wilbur convinced himself were possible anyway.

An unsaid truth that was twisted into the meaning of the nickname *little bird*. A truth that was folded between the lines of Phil telling Wilbur he deserved better, and that he wanted to help him become something more.

But it wasn’t yesterday. The night before hadn’t been a paranoia-induced hallucination. It had been real.

The worry in Ranboo’s eyes was fake. The way he curled in on himself when he asked why Tommy might be upset with him was part of an act.

*Liar*, Wilbur’s mind whispered the longer he stared at Ranboo. *Liar liar liar-*

“It took time,” Wilbur answered, straightening his shoulders as lies and truth combined spilled from his lips like water. “I don’t know exactly how it happened, but we just... got to know each other. Gradually. And one day I realized that I was no longer second-guessing every interaction we had.” He paused. It was a calculated pause. One that Ranboo would take as hesitation, although Wilbur already knew exactly what he was going to say next.

“One day I realized I no longer thought he was lying every time we spoke.”

Just like he expected, Ranboo let out a soft gasp at that. His eyes widened, and nausea crept up the back of his throat knowing that Ranboo was going to run and repeat this conversation to Phil the second they said their goodbyes.

“I- I guess that makes sense,” Ranboo stammered, mind clearly reeling with the implications of what Wilbur had told him.

He paused, glancing around the hall like he was searching for an escape.

“Thanks for, um, talking with me. I’ll try to talk with Tommy again later tonight. If he’s upset after his fight with you, I wanna be there to help him if he needs,” Ranboo said, taking a step back from Wilbur. “I should be going though. I just realized Techno’s probably waiting to start our lessons.”

The anger was back. It was surging through Wilbur’s chest, echoing in the waves that crashed in his head as he stared at the traitor standing in front of him.

But he pressed his lips together, and forced himself to nod. “Thank you, Ranboo. It eases my mind a bit knowing that even if we’re not talking, Tommy has a friend like you to rely on.”

A part of him wanted to see Ranboo flinch. To watch a piece of the facade break off. Any acknowledgement that Ranboo knew how badly he was hurting Tommy with his act.

He didn’t even blink.

“That means a lot, Orpheus,” he said instead, giving Wilbur a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Wilbur replied, flashing Ranboo a sickly sweet smile in return.

With one last nod, Ranboo turned on his heel and hurried back the way he came.

And Wilbur didn’t miss how it was straight in the direction of the throne room.



That night, Wilbur took his dinner in his room.

This wasn’t unusual for him. Although it had become more commonplace to share meals with Phil the longer he stayed in the personal wing, he still took meals alone several times a week. It was usually when he was too drained to even think about holding a conversation with Phil. When all he wanted was to bury himself in his blankets, and let his mind go blank until the next morning came.

Today was different. But Phil didn’t know that, so no one batted an eye at his request to eat alone.

Chewing on a bread roll, he paced around his bedroom, lost in thought as he tried to think of what happened now. Tommy had promised he would come by his room again tonight, but he hadn’t said what time. So that left Wilbur with a seemingly endless wait stretched in front of him, and far too many thoughts to sort through on his own.

His conversation with Ranboo hadn’t just left a bad taste in his mouth—it nearly made him sick. How easily Ranboo could pretend to care. How there hadn’t been the slightest hint of guilt in that smile he flashed Wilbur at the end.

Tommy was right. They were suffocating here. He could still feel the phantom weight of Phil’s hand on the back of his neck, that unsaid promise echoing in his ears.

The negotiations were practically finished. The decision had been made, and all that was left was for Tommy to sign the papers. The illusion of choice was still being dangled in front of them, but the truth of the matter was that he and Tommy were shackled here.

Hands on shoulders, gazes pressing down on them. The option to refuse was taken from them long ago. They were merely being led through a whole song and dance without even being able to hear the music. With the information Ranboo provided them, Phil and Techno were able to corral Wilbur and Tommy like mindless cattle.

Maybe that wasn't true. But Wilbur couldn't afford to rely on maybes anymore. They could only keep up the act of their argument for so long before one of them slipped up. And then they would be out of time.

Late into the evening, long after his mostly empty plate had been taken from his room, Wilbur heard a knock at his door.

His heart leapt in his throat as he ran to the door. When it hissed open to reveal his little brother on the other side, a colossal weight was lifted off his shoulders, and it took all his energy not to collapse on top of Tommy as he dragged him inside.

"Thank fuck, I was going nuts on my own," Wilbur whispered as he yanked Tommy into a hug.

Tommy hugged him back just as tight, burying his face in Wilbur's shoulder and clutching the back of his shirt like a drowning man. "Me too. I didn't wanna risk anyone spotting me so I waited as long as I could, but I felt like my head was gonna explode if I didn't talk to you soon."

For the first time since Tommy left that morning, the prickling under his skin eased up. It wasn't gone completely, but he no longer felt like his nerves were on fire, and the relief of that alone was enough to make him go weak in the knees.

The two stayed like that for a few more minutes. The only sound in the room was their ragged breaths, and Wilbur could feel Tommy's rapid heartbeat fluttering against his shirt.

Eventually, Wilbur forced himself to pull back. Tommy didn't fight it, but before he could say anything, Wilbur was nudging his shoulder, guiding him to the couch in the center of the room.

They sat down together, pressed shoulder to shoulder as silence filled the air between them. There was so much they needed to talk about. Too much. Too many thoughts and feelings to put into words.

But they were on limited time, so they had to try.

"I talked to Phil and Ranboo today," Wilbur began, staring at his hands in his lap. "Ranboo mentioned you seemed upset at him."

Sighing, Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I tried to act like everything was normal but I just- I could barely stand to look at him, y'know? Every time I saw his face I'd just think about what he said last night, and I'd get so upset I fucking-"

He cut himself off with a shaky breath. Wilbur waited, giving him time to collect himself.

"I managed to talk to him a bit during dinner. He said you told him about our 'fight', so I just played off of that," Tommy explained, picking at the skin around his nails. "I don't think he suspects anything."

"That's good," Wilbur murmured, biting the inside of his cheek. "Did you talk to Techno?"



At this, Tommy flinched, curling further back into the couch. “Yeah, I did.” He paused, a crease forming between his brows. “It was... easier than talking to Ranboo. But harder at the same time. Because at least with Ranboo, I know it’s all fake. I know he never gave a shit. But with Techno it’s- it’s-”

His hands fluttered in the air as he struggled to put his thoughts into words. But truthfully, he didn’t need to. Wilbur understood exactly what he was trying to say.

“I get it,” he said, bringing his knees up to his chest. “I feel the same about Phil.”

They fell into silence again. Understanding wasn’t the same as having answers, and that was what they needed most at the moment.

“Phil said something to me today,” Wilbur piped up after another few minutes of staring at the wall. “I think he meant it in, like, a comforting way. But it wasn’t.”

Tommy frowned, turning to look at Wilbur. “What did he say?”

Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut, ignoring the phantom hand tracing circles into the back of his neck. “He’s really confident we’re joining the Empire. While he didn’t say it outright, he said something that implied it’s basically been decided.”

“Fuck,” Tommy muttered, wrapping his arms around himself. “That’s- *fuck*.”

“I know,” Wilbur huffed, gaze fixing on the wall again.

Another beat.

“He’s not wrong,” Tommy then said, far softer this time. “I’ve talked with Techno about it so much, I’ve done everything but sign the fucking paper. It’s my fault.”

Immediately, Wilbur shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” Tommy insisted, voice cracking. “I’m the one who opened up to Techno and Ranboo first. I’m the one who pushed for us to consider joining the Empire. You kept telling me we couldn’t trust anyone, but I thought you were just being paranoid.” He buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking in a way that made Wilbur’s chest ache.

“I feel so fucking stupid,” he then said, sounding like he was on the verge of breaking down.

Reaching out, Wilbur pulled Tommy into his side, and Tommy immediately curled against his chest.

“I- I can’t breathe here, Wilbur,” Tommy stammered, struggling to hold back tears. “I can’t fucking *think* with Techno and Ranboo breathing down my goddamn neck and it’s driving me insane!”

Burying his face in Tommy’s hair, Wilbur took a deep breath, trying to ignore the anxiety wrapping a band around his chest.

“Me too,” he confessed. “I thought talking to Phil might help clear things up but it only made things worse. I feel like I’m being watched and my thoughts just start spinning out of control-”

“And you feel like you’re going to scream if you don’t get out soon,” Tommy finished for him, clutching the front of his shirt like a child. “Yeah, I get it.”

Seconds ticked by. The iron band got tighter.

“We can’t stay here,” Tommy finally said, his voice barely audible in the dark room.

Wilbur swallowed down the lump in his throat. “I... I think you’re right.”

A breath.

“It’s not shutting down the negotiations,” Tommy continued, a bit louder now. “We just- we need more time. And we need to just get some time away from Phil and Techno.”

“They’ll never go for that,” Wilbur pointed out. “It’s way too dangerous with Essempi still looking for us, and Phil and Techno have made it clear they don’t want Essempi to get their hands on us.”

“Yeah, which means we have to escape.”

A rock dropped into Wilbur’s gut. He’d known that’s where this conversation was going since the moment Tommy walked into the room, but it was one thing to think about escape as an abstract idea. It was a whole other thing to actually consider it as a possibility.

He tried to imagine leaving Zephyrs IV. Flying out into space again, trying to find a new planet to hide out on while ignoring the twinge of regret that was already festering inside of him.

A part of him wanted to keep trying. Try to get more information. Try to figure out what had been a lie, and what was real.

But that would take time that they didn’t have. Plain and simple.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Wilbur then said. “This place is a fortress. We’re not gonna be able to just walk out the front door.”

At this, Tommy pulled away from the hug, forcing Wilbur to meet his eyes. They were bloodshot, and tears still threatened to spill over onto his cheeks, but there was a determination settled into the watery blue that Wilbur had never seen before.

“We shouldn’t have been able to escape Eldingvegr, but here we are,” Tommy reminded him, wrapping his arms around himself again. “So how hard can it be?”

welp the brothers are making a VERY stupid decision. trauma response amiright.

I hope you guys enjoyed!! this chapter was definitely a bit of a struggle for me to write, but I think I've gotten back in the flow of this fic so I'm gonna try and get the next one out as soon as possible. however, it might take a bit more time for the next chapter to come out because it's going to be VERY long. either it'll be very long, or I'm going to split it into two chapters once I'm done with the entire thing. we'll see how I feel once it's written but goddamn it's gonna be a doozy. so that 28 chapter count might end up shifting to 29. I don't know yet.

but we're finally getting into the last arc of this fic!! it's taken so much longer to write this than I expected, but I'm so proud of how the final product is turning out. I'm really glad you guys are sticking with me for such a long ride, and I really appreciate all the kind things you guys say about this story. it means so much to me and I'm so happy so many of you are enjoying it.

ok that's all for now. remember to check out my tumblr and the tag #the stars and their children on my blog to find a lot of analysis discuss with other readers!

please leave a comment if you enjoyed! they really mean a lot to me :)

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# oil on troubled waters

## Chapter Summary

In order to escape from Zephys IV, Wilbur and Tommy need a plan.

## Chapter Notes

HI HI EVERYONE!! I'm so excited for you guys to read this oh my god

okay note! I actually had to split this chapter in 2 because it was almost 17k words long! so if you'll look at the chapter count, you'll see it's been upped to 29 chapters total. hopefully that number doesn't grow anymore lmao

also, hope you all had lovely holidays! if you don't celebrate the holidays then I hope you've had a lovely past week. we're almost in 2023! that's insane!

anyway, this is a really fun chapter so I hope you guys enjoy it :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, Wilbur found himself walking down the familiar halls of the palace, his conversation with Tommy from the night before echoing in his ears.

*"Okay, first off, we need to find out where our shuttle is," Wilbur had whispered to Tommy in the dark shadows of his room.*

Before they could figure out anything else, they needed to know they had a way off the planet in the first place. While they could hypothetically steal an Antarctic shuttle, considering Wilbur's already weak flying skills, it would be more ideal if he could stick with what he knew.

When they arrived on Zephys IV all those months ago, their shuttle had been left in the hangar, and Wilbur presumed it had been put into storage. But he didn't know that for sure. For all he knew, the whole thing could've been dismantled for scraps.

It wasn't likely. But either way, Wilbur had to find out what happened to it. However, if he asked about his shuttle out of the blue after so much time had passed, that would definitely raise suspicion. For the first time since they got here, he and Tommy had the upper hand on Phil and Techno, and he intended to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Which meant Wilbur had to find another way to find out what happened to his shuttle. And there *was* one person he could ask about it.

He just had to figure out if they were trustworthy or not.

Although Wilbur hadn't told Jack where they were going, he knew it wouldn't be long before his guard figured out where he was taking them. He watched Jack out of the corner of his eye, as if he could read his mind if he stared at him for long enough.

Jack suspected something. That much was obvious by the way he kept frowning at Wilbur. He knew it had been a risk to stage that fight in front of him the morning before, and his suspicions were quickly being proven right. Because Wilbur's past honesty with Jack had given him the tools to read him like few other people in the palace could. He could see it in Jack's mismatched brown and blue gaze. There was a silent question there. A puzzle he couldn't figure out every time he caught Wilbur's eye.

But he wasn't asking. That was the thing about Jack—he never pushed for information. And that was exactly why Wilbur was holding out hope he might be able to still call Jack a friend.

"Wait, Wil, are we going up to the—"

"Yes," Wilbur cut Jack off as he started on the stairs. "I hope you don't mind, but you know how the cold air helps me sometimes."

Jack's eyes widened in understanding. "Yeah, of course, man. Let's go."

From there, Jack took the lead. He led Wilbur up the flight of stairs and to the small closet, opening it with a quick scan. Then, the two made their way up the spiral steps to the trapdoor, and soon enough Wilbur was being blasted with ice cold wind as he and Jack settled into their usual spots on the balcony.

Wilbur wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but it almost felt colder than usual up there. The wind cut right through his coat, icy claws seeping deep into his bones and sending a chill up his spine.

Still, the cold brought with it that frigid clarity he needed so badly. The wind bit at his cheeks as he tried to soothe the pounding of his heart, and Jack, as always, waited for him to speak first.

This was going to be a difficult conversation to have. If it went wrong, their plan would be ruined before it even started. But he and Tommy *had* to get off this planet. If they didn't, they were both going to lose their minds. And this wasn't something they could do without help.

Wilbur just had to hope his instinct about Jack was right.

"Do you still purposefully fuck up your reports to Puffy about what I'm doing?" Wilbur asked after several minutes of silence, his words almost being carried away by the howling wind.

Jack stiffened, clearly not expecting Wilbur to bring that up of all things. “She stopped asking for those ages ago, actually.”

Wait, what?

“Why?”

At this, Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. She just said she’d been told it wasn’t necessary anymore.”

Wilbur frowned. “Do you think it’s because she suspected you were giving her bad information on purpose?”

“I don’t think so. I wasn’t stupid about it. I made the reports sound decent, I just wouldn’t mention anything they didn’t already know.” Jack shifted, resting one arm on his knee, before furrowing his brows. “Why’re you asking about this when you haven’t brought it up in months?”

Alright, Wilbur was going to have to watch his words *very* carefully here.

“Are we actually friends, Jack?” He asked instead of answering his question. “Because I’ve said we’re friends, and you seem to agree with that, but I don’t get why.”

Jack blinked. “The fuck do you mean by that?”

“I mean I don’t understand why you’d want to be friends with me,” Wilbur pushed, straightening up against the wall. “I don’t bring anything to the table here. You spend more time keeping me from having a goddamn panic attack than anything else, and I just don’t get why you’d give enough of a shit about me to literally lie to your superiors on my behalf.”

There was a moment of silence as Jack processed what he’d said. Then, his frown deepened.

“Are you asking me this because you’re having another one of your, ‘I’m a terrible fucking person’ spirals, or are you asking me about this because you don’t think I’m actually your friend?” Jack asked, something tight entering his voice.

Wilbur clenched his jaw. “It’s not a pity thing, if that’s what you mean.”

A beat passed as Jack nodded at this, bringing a hand up to rub at his jaw as anger flashed in his eyes.

“Y’know, you have a lot of fucking nerve,” Jack finally said, eyes fixed on the city skyline. “I’ve never pushed you to talk to me. I never asked you questions I thought you might not trust me enough to answer. You said I was your friend, and I’ve done everything in my goddamn power to make sure I live up to that because, guess what, guards like me aren’t supposed to have friends. We’re supposed to be invisible to the royals.” He paused, turning to meet Wilbur’s eyes. “You wanna know why I’m your friend? Because I wasn’t invisible to you, and that fucking *meant* something to me. Is that a good enough answer for you?”

Wincing, Wilbur did his best to school his expression into something more neutral, but it was difficult when Jack was scowling at him like that.

“Look, the concept of friends is a little difficult for me considering I’ve been betrayed by multiple people who have told me they’re my friend,” Wilbur explained, wrapping his arms around himself. “I need to know who I can trust here.”

The frown on Jack’s face faded, but his eyes didn’t soften as the seconds ticked on.

“Wil, you clearly have something on your mind you wanna talk to me about. But if you don’t trust me, then don’t tell me what it is. Because the thing is, if I get asked what’s going on with you, I’m not gonna rat you out. I’m gonna say you don’t tell me shit. But that’s just coming out of my mouth, and like you said, we don’t have a reason to be friends. I get that you don’t have a reason to trust me, but I’m not gonna jump through hoops or whatever to prove myself. Either you tell me or you don’t. I don’t care either way.”

And that-

That’s what made Wilbur’s decision right then and there.

Jack wasn’t *asking* for information. He genuinely didn’t seem to care whether or not Wilbur confided in him. In a situation like this, a spy would almost certainly make promises like, *of course you can trust me* or *I could’ve ratted you out so many times already and I didn’t, so why would I do it now?*

That wasn’t what Jack was doing. He put it in the simplest terms possible. They didn’t have a reason to be friends, but they were. He wasn’t going to try and prove himself as trustworthy to Wilbur because he wasn’t asking Wilbur to confide in him.

Wilbur could be wrong about this. But his gut instinct was back, and it was telling him to trust Jack.

He’d ignored his instincts with Ranboo before, and now he was paying the price for it. He wasn’t going to ignore them again.

“Ranboo’s a spy,” Wilbur blurted out after nearly a full minute of silence.

Jack’s eyes went wide. “Excuse me, *what?*”

“I overheard him talking to Techno the other night. He’s been reporting all of his conversations with me and Tommy to Techno and Phil, presumably ever since we got here,” Wilbur explained, the words spilling out of him in a rush. “I’d been suspicious of him from the start, but Tommy kept telling me I was being overly paranoid, and after a while I started believing him. But Ranboo’s a fucking liar and that’s why I’ve been acting so weird the past two days.”

There was a moment of silence as Jack gaped at him, shock written across his face.

Then, it twisted into a scowl.

“What a fucking prick!” He exclaimed, slamming his hands down on the ground. “I- I thought he and Theseus were best friends! I’d always see the two of them running around whispering to each other and shit!”

“Tommy thought they were best friends too, but we heard Techno say he ordered Ranboo to try and befriend both of us,” Wilbur said, slumping back against the wall as a crushing weight was lifted off his shoulders.

At this, Jack paused. “You and Theseus are talking again?”

Wilbur huffed. “Yup. That fight you heard us having yesterday morning was staged. I didn’t know if I could trust you, and we don’t want Phil and Techno to find out we’re talking again because they’ll make us move forward with the negotiations.”

For a moment, Jack stared at him. Then, he snorted and fell back against the opposite wall, shaking his head. “I knew there was something weird with that fight. I couldn’t hear what you two were saying through the door, but after Theseus stormed out and you ran after him, I could just tell there was more going on than what you were telling me.”

“How could you tell?” Wilbur asked, feeling the hair on the back of his neck rise up.

“Not sure how to explain it, but when you two first had your fight, and anytime he got brought up after that, you had this... look in your eyes,” Jack explained. “I’d almost say it was like you were empty. Just like something wasn’t there, y’know? But after that fight you two had yesterday morning, I noticed the emptiness wasn’t there anymore.”

“That’s good to know,” Wilbur murmured, frowning at his hands. “It’s something to work on, I suppose.”

A few moments ticked by. The cold air was really starting to dig into Wilbur’s skin at this point, and he knew that they’d have to go back inside soon before he lost all feeling in his hands.

“There’s a reason I’m telling you about this, Jack,” Wilbur then said, shoving his hands back into his pockets. “Me and Tommy both agree that because of this Ranboo situation, we don’t know if we can trust anything Phil and Techno have told us up to this point.”

“Yeah, that’s understandable. They’ve been spying on you the whole fucking time. I’d be pissed too,” Jack nodded.

Wilbur mirrored Jack’s nodding, eyes drifting back to the skyline again. “Yeah. We just don’t know.” He tapped his foot nervously against the stone, the sound jarring against the howling wind. “That’s why we need to leave.”

Jack’s response was immediate.

*“What?”*

“We need to leave,” Wilbur repeated, now avoiding Jack’s wide-eyed look. “Not- Not permanently, or anything. But we can’t fucking breathe here, Jack. Neither of us. We can only



pretend to still be fighting for so long, but we don't know what we wanna do with the negotiations right now. And having Phil and Techno both looming over us and not being able to tell what's true and what's fake-" he cut himself off with a shaky breath, trying to steady himself. "I feel like my head is exploding. I can't fucking *think* inside this goddamn palace, so we have to get off this planet, at least for a bit."

"Where would you guys even go?" Jack asked, still gaping at him.

"I don't know. Badlands, maybe? They're only allied with the Empire, not part of it, so they can't technically be forced to hand us back over." There was the other matter of what reason they could give the Badlands to not hand them over to Phil and Techno, but he would cross that bridge when they got to it. "If not them, maybe some unaffiliated Outer Sector planet. Somewhere no one would find us. Just so we could get some time to think things through."

"Wilbur, that's fucking insane," Jack told him, pushing to his knees. "Essempi-"

"We won't let Essempi find us," Wilbur said, cutting him off. "I know what you're going to say and I know it's a stupid plan, but you just- you don't get it. We have to get off this planet or else we're both going to lose our minds."

Jack considered this for a moment. He clenched his jaw, worry dancing in his eyes as he glanced between Wilbur and the trapdoor leading back into the palace.

Then, Jack let out a deep sigh, and looked back at Wilbur's face. "There's a reason you're telling me this."

Wilbur nodded. "We need your help."

"Wil, I don't know-"

"You said you're my friend, right?" Wilbur asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "Because if you're really my friend—if you actually care about me as a person and not just as a political figure—you would help me."

Jack's brows furrowed. "That's not fair."

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Wilbur pushed off the wall and made his way over to Jack's side of the balcony. He placed his hands on Jack's shoulders, looking straight into his eyes as he took another breath to steady his voice.

"Jack, I'm begging you, I need your help on this," Wilbur pleaded. "Please. You're the only person in this entire fucking palace I trust besides Tommy. Don't make me regret that."

One second passed.

And another.

Then,

“Fuck me,” Jack muttered, shaking his head before meeting Wilbur’s eyes again. “Fine. What do you need from me?”

Relief flooded over Wilbur like warm, tropical waters. It soothed the chill that had settled deep into his bones, and made him forget about the way his fingers were starting to turn blue.

“Right now I just need some information,” Wilbur explained, smiling as his pounding heart began to slow. “The shuttle me and Tommy came here in—it got left in the hangar the day we were brought to the palace. Do you know where it is?”

A few minutes later, Wilbur and Jack were back inside the palace, and Wilbur’s hands tingled as warmth flooded back into them. Jack was grim-faced as he led Wilbur down the familiar halls, wearing the kind of solemnity one would see leading someone to an execution.

In a way, Wilbur figured that’s what Jack must’ve been thinking right then. That he was going to help get Wilbur and Tommy killed. And maybe there was a seed of guilt sitting like a rock in Wilbur’s chest because he knew he hadn’t been fair to Jack during that conversation, but it was the only way he could think to convince him.

Wilbur knew how risky a move like this was. But his mind was a raging storm, and there was only one thing he could focus on to keep himself sane.

Getting out.

Thanks to Jack, Wilbur now knew that their shuttle had been put into long-term storage in the hangar. It was nearly impossible to access it where it was now, but it was still there. That meant Wilbur just had to find a way to get it taken out of long-term storage. Which led him to the second part of his plan for the day.

They stopped in front of the familiar door, anxiety crawling up Wilbur’s throat as he thought about how he was going to pull this off. But then again, he’d felt the same way about Jack, and while Jack could still betray them, Wilbur’s instincts were telling him that wasn’t going to happen.

He just had to hope for the best.

Lifting a hand, Wilbur knocked on the metal door. There was some shuffling behind it along with some low curses, before it hissed open to reveal a very tired-looking Quackity.

“Orpheus?” Quackity’s voice was rough with sleep, and his dark hair was sticking up in every direction. Despite the fact that it was midday, it seemed like he’d just woken up. “The fuck are you doing here?”

“We need to talk,” Wilbur said, placing a hand on the doorway. “Can I come in?”

Pausing, Quackity blinked a few times, as if trying to wake himself up. He glanced past Wilbur to see Jack standing off to the side, purposefully looking the other way. Then, his eyes settled back on Wilbur.

“Fine. Come in,” he agreed, stepping out of the doorway.

Looking over his shoulder, Wilbur shared a nod with Jack before stepping into Quackity's room. The door hissed as it shut behind him.

Quackity dragged a hand down his face as he shuffled inside, limbs sluggish with the remnants of sleep. His room didn't look any different from the last time Wilbur had seen it. Boxes were still shoved into the corner, the desk was still littered with a myriad of random objects—the only difference being that there was even more stuff than last time. More jewelry, more boxes, more liquor bottles.

"Business seems to be doing well," Wilbur commented as he wandered over to the couch, not sitting on it but leaning against the arm.

Quackity, who was leaning against his desk, narrowed his eyes.

"You didn't come in here to ask me about my work."

It wasn't a question, but it wasn't hostile either. In fact, Quackity's entire demeanor was far less aggressive than it had been during the past interactions. Right now, there was that same hesitancy in his eyes he had when he found out Wilbur was staying in the personal wing. Like he was on guard.

"No, I didn't," Wilbur answered honestly, folding his arms over his chest. "I actually have a proposition for you."

Quackity raised an eyebrow. "Well, I'm flattered, but even if you are a pretty face I have a rule not to get involved with politicians."

Wilbur snorted at the joke, some of his anxiety ebbing away. "I meant a business proposition." He paused, a smirking flickering over his face. "This time."

At this, Quackity rolled his eyes. "Don't get your hopes up. Any kind of proposition, business or otherwise, isn't something I agree to easily."

"What if the business proposition comes with the promise of blaziphane?" Wilbur asked coolly. "More blaziphane than you'd ever see in your entire lifetime otherwise?"

This seemed to strike a chord.

Quackity's smirk fell, something far more serious taking over his face as he mirrored Wilbur's pose, crossing his arms over his chest. His tattoos rippled in the low light of the bedroom, feathers rustling like they were agitated.

"I'd imagine any business that could get me that would be something pretty dangerous," Quackity said, looking Wilbur up and down.

Wilbur hummed. "It won't be dangerous as long as certain parties don't find out we arranged this. Because if they do, not only will we both be at risk, but I'll personally ensure you never get your hands on another vial of blaziphane for as long as you live."

A long silence stretched between them, Wilbur not breaking Quackity's gaze as the veiled threat hung in the air. Unlike any kind of physical threat, Wilbur's threat was fully plausible. Whether Tommy retained control of Eldingvegr, or Phil and Techno took it for themselves, either way Wilbur was in a position to keep at least some level of influence over who got their hands on blaziphane.

The coat on his shoulders proved this, and Quackity knew it.

"By 'certain parties', you mean Phil and Techno, don't you?" He asked after nearly two minutes.

"And Ranboo," Wilbur added.

Another eyebrow raise. "Look, I'm a man of confidentiality as long as there's money in it for me. And blaziphane would get me *a lot* of money. So I'm not gonna go out of my way to screw myself out of that for no good reason."

Wilbur nodded, the tightness in his chest easing somewhat. "Alright." He paused, taking a breath to steady himself. It was time for the second big risk of the day.

In a way, telling Quackity what was going on held both greater and less risk than telling Jack. The greater risk was because while Jack was his friend, Wilbur really had no clue where his relationship stood with Quackity. They'd gone from snapping at each other in the hallway, to having a physical fight, to Wilbur getting drunk off his ass and venting all his problems to him. He wasn't sure if that made them friends, enemies with a truce, or something else entirely.

But there was less risk as well. Because unlike with Jack, who had everything to lose and very little to gain from helping Wilbur, Quackity had a *lot* to gain from not snitching to Phil and Techno about the plan. He was a businessman first and foremost. And that's how Wilbur knew he wasn't going to turn down his offer of blaziphane.

Despite knowing this though, Wilbur still found his heart pounding in his chest as he opened his mouth again.

"Tommy and I arrived here on a shuttle from Eldingvegr. Right now, the shuttle is in long-term storage, but we need to get it back into the main hangar so we can access it."

Quackity frowned. "And I'm guessing there's a reason you can't just ask Philza to have it taken out of long-term storage?"

Folding his arms over his chest again, Wilbur fixed his eyes on the wall behind Quackity's head. "Because that would raise suspicion."

A beat.

"Raise suspicion of *what* exactly, Orpheus?"

"An escape," Wilbur answered in as level of a voice as he could manage. "It would raise suspicions that we might be trying to escape."

Considering this for a moment, Quackity hooked his thumbs into his pockets, scar twitching as he bit the inside of his cheek.

“You’re not a prisoner here,” he then said, brows furrowing. “Why would he think you’re trying to escape?”

Quackity didn’t ask *if* he was planning to escape. He simply asked why.

“Because motivations are a tricky thing to discern, Quackity,” Wilbur explained. “And trust... well, if you don’t know what someone’s motivations are, how can you trust them?”

“I thought you didn’t trust the Empire,” Quackity asked, sounding smug.

Wilbur clenched his jaw, dropping his eyes to the floor. “I didn’t.” He paused. “I don’t.”

“Then why are you here? If you don’t give out your trust, how did it get broken?”

Taking a measured breath through his nose, Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to focus on the rhythms of the waves. His fingers twitched, that same anger flooding through his veins once more.

Quackity was judging him. Laughing at him, almost.

He forced himself to shove down the anger—to silence the roaring in his ears. He couldn’t afford to lose an ally in Quackity so fast. Not now. Not after what he told him.

“I need you to put in a request for our shuttle to be pulled out of long-term storage,” Wilbur said instead of answering his question. “Say that you want to salvage some spare parts from it to sell or something. Considering your occupation, I’m sure you can come up with an excuse for why you’d need to get your hands on Eldingvegrian engineering.”

At this, Quackity huffed. “You say that like I can ask to steal parts from your ship and Philza will just hand it over.”

“I’ll grant permission for it if I need to,” Wilbur shot back.

“Oh, and that won’t raise any suspicions at all,” Quackity drawled, sarcasm dripping from his words. “Why the fuck would you let me just take parts from your ship to sell? We both know you don’t need the money.”

“I can bullshit some excuse,” Wilbur snapped, his patience growing thin. “Either way, that’s not your concern, it’s mine. I just need to know if you’ll do it or not.”

Dragging a hand down his face, Quackity glanced between Wilbur and the wall. He mulled over the options, Wilbur practically able to see the gears turning in his mind.

A minute passed. Wilbur’s stomach twisted into knots.

Then,

“You do realize that if you leave the surface of this planet, Dream *will* find you, and you’ll die.”

“He’s not going to find us,” Wilbur forced out between gritted teeth. “We’ve escaped him once, we can do it again.”

“You see, I wanna believe you, Orpheus, but if I do this for you then I kind of really need you to not die,” Quackity told him. “Because if you die, not only am I not gonna get any blaziphane, but Philza and Technoblade will cut my goddamn head off for helping you escape.”

“Oh come on, Quackity,” Wilbur scoffed, shaking his head. “You’re a fucking smuggler. I’m sure you know how to tell a convincing lie. Tell the two of them that I said you could sell the parts from my ship, and that you didn’t think anything of it.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I’m not a complete idiot, and Philza is well-aware of that.”

“For fuck’s sake just-” Wilbur cut himself off, digging his nails into his palms to try and hold himself strong against the water rushing in his ears.

If this conversation was a game, then Wilbur was losing. Badly. He was trying to pit the promise of riches against Quackity’s self-preservation skills, but he was falling short. If he wanted Quackity to agree, he had to convince him that he and Tommy could do this.

As much as he tried to fight against it, Wilbur found himself thinking back to Phil. How he might handle a situation like this.

Phil had always said Wilbur reminded him of himself. Wilbur supposed right now was as good of a time as any to see if that was true.

“I’ve sacrificed so much to keep my brother safe,” Wilbur said quietly, resting his hands on the back of the couch. “When Eldingvegr was being invaded, we hid in a crawlspace for *days*. We survived off a few food bars and a pitiful amount of water. We had to stay completely silent, or else the soldiers walking right on the other side of the wall would hear us and kill us. Every hour, every minute, every fucking second we were a single sneeze away from being found out. But we weren’t. And when a window of opportunity opened up, we were forced to make a break for it. There’s no way we should’ve made it, but *we did*.”

An ache flashed through his clenched jaw, and his eyes were cold as they lifted again to meet Quackity’s.

“I haven’t given you much reason to think I’m a very capable man. I understand that.” He pushed away from the couch, closing the distance between him and Quackity. He tilted his head down so they were eye to eye, and Wilbur willed himself to put as much conviction in his voice as he possibly could.

“Believe me when I tell you, I have my ways of ensuring mine and my brother’s survival,” Wilbur continued, his voice low. “You don’t want to find out what they are.”

A moment passed. Quackity gulped, and Wilbur saw fear flash through his eyes.

He held out a hand between them.

“Do we have a deal?”

Seconds ticked by. The saltwater was no longer burning Wilbur’s throat. Now, he let it flow into his lungs without struggle. He wasn’t drowning. Instead, he was part of the waves, and they were a part of him.

A rough hand grasped his own.

“I still don’t think you know what you’re getting into, but fine. I’ll ask about getting the shuttle out of storage today,” Quackity relented as he shook his hand.

Anxiety draining out of him all at once, Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief as he dropped the hand and stepped back. “Alright. How much do you know about shuttles?”

Shoving his hands back into his pockets, Quackity shrugged. “A decent amount. Why?”

“When they take the shuttle out of storage, I need you to check to make sure it’s still functional,” Wilbur told him. “I don’t think anything would’ve been done to it, but I want to make sure no critical parts were removed or anything like that before we try to fly out of here in it. Once you’ve done that, call my guard, Jack, and he’ll bring me to you so we can talk. Got it?”

Quackity nodded. “Got it. I’ll let you know when it’s done.”

And that-

That was it. He’d done it.

Internally, Wilbur was reeling over the fact that he’d succeeded. He’d actually convinced Quackity to help them. If the shuttle was still intact... they might actually do this.

Reality settled into Wilbur’s bones like an unwelcome chill as he said his goodbye’s to Quackity and left the room. The plan was put in motion. This was actually happening. They were going to leave Zephys IV.

Nervousness sparked inside of him, but he did his best to ignore it as Jack led him down the hall and back towards the personal wing. His eyes skimmed the arched ceilings and concrete pillars, wondering if this was the last time he’d ever see them in the daylight. How long would it take for Quackity to get the shuttle? Hours? Days?

A part of him hoped it would only take a few hours. The other part of him wanted it to be delayed for as long as possible.

Footsteps echoed off the wall—too many for just his and Jack’s shoes. He didn’t register the reason for that until it was too late though, and turned a corner only to find a jolt of electricity rushing through him.

There was a flash of pink, and Wilbur wondered if there was ever going to be a time that seeing Techno didn't send dread washing over him. But then, the second Wilbur's eyes locked onto Tommy's, he clamped his mouth shut, schooling his face into something as close to neutrality as possible. He saw Tommy do the same, furrowing his brows and looking down at the ground like he was suddenly very interested in his shoes.

Beside Tommy, Ranboo stiffened. He glanced between the brothers, twisting his hands in front of him like he wasn't sure if he should keep walking or not. Then, in front of the three of them, Puffy showed no reaction to Wilbur and Jack's presence. She nodded at Jack once, and slowed her pace when she noticed that Ranboo, Tommy, and Techno had stopped walking, but otherwise didn't seem keen to acknowledge that anything was wrong as she kept moving down the hall.

Sympathy flashed through Wilbur when he noticed Ranboo nudge Tommy's shoulder—an attempt at comfort, no doubt. Tommy flinched, sparing a glance at Wilbur. To an outsider, Wilbur knew it would seem like he was the cause of Tommy's flinch. Techno stood behind Tommy, a hand hovering over his back like he was guiding him, but not trying to touch him. His expression was unreadable as his gaze flickered over Wilbur, before settling back on Tommy with something that Wilbur once would've mistaken for concern swirling in the gold.

Tension crackled in the hallway, and Wilbur made no attempts to defuse it. Instead, he hunched his own shoulders, meeting Tommy's eyes again only for a moment before forcing himself to focus on the back of Jack's head.

*Good*, Wilbur thought to himself as he noticed Ranboo wilt under the suffocating silence, still looking between the brothers. *He thinks we hate each other.*

The run-in lasted less than a minute, but to Wilbur it felt like an hour. They passed by one another without a word between them, and soon enough Tommy, Ranboo, Techno, and Puffy were turning the corner down another hall, leaving Jack and Wilbur behind.

He breathed a sigh of relief as soon as they were out of sight. Jack flashed him a knowing look, and Wilbur gave him a small nod. They both knew what the real source of tension there had been.

After that, they made it back to the personal wing without issue. Foolishly, Wilbur thought that this was the end of his struggles for the day. That he would be able to go back to his room and hide there until Jack got the call from Quackity.

Of course, things couldn't be that easy.

While he was able to go back to his room, his respite didn't last for long. He was laying on his bed, staring at the shimmering canopy that sat between him and the ceiling, trying to undo the knots his stomach had twisted itself into when a knock at the door startled him out of his thoughts.

He bolted upright. Was that Jack? Had he gotten the call from Quackity already? Wilbur didn't think it would be that fast, and dread curled itself around his shoulders as he got to his feet and padded to the door.



As soon as the door slid open, all thoughts of their impending escape disappeared from Wilbur's mind. Because it wasn't Jack standing in front of him like he'd expected.

"Phil?" Wilbur exclaimed, furrowing his brows. "What are you doing here?"

In all his time in the personal wing, Phil had never come to his room. Sure, they took meals together, and sure, Wilbur had gone to Phil's office plenty of times to talk to him. But to have Phil come to *him*?

Something was going on.

"Don't worry, mate. There's nothing wrong," Phil reassured him, no doubt seeing the fear flash over his face. "I actually have something to ask you about, but is it alright if I come in first?"

Wilbur's heart was slamming against his ribs. He knew. That had to be it. But wouldn't he be angry if he knew? Phil didn't *seem* angry. However, Wilbur knew he could've been hiding it. Was the warmth in his eyes real? Or was he waiting to be alone with Wilbur to finally drop the act?

A dozen questions raced through his head, echoing in his ears and reverberating through his skull. It was so overwhelming that all Wilbur could do in that moment was step back and gesture for Phil to come inside.

Behind Phil, Wilbur saw Jack borderline gaping at the back of Phil's head. Then, he caught Wilbur's eyes, and silently mouthed, *what the fuck*? Wilbur almost laughed at how Jack seemed to think he had the slightest clue as to why Phil was there.

Instead though, the only thing he could do was give Jack a grim look as the door hissed shut.

"Sorry to drop by without warning," Phil said as he glanced around the room, eyes lingering on the rumpled bed and boots discarded by the wall. "Did I interrupt anything?"

Hovering by the door, Wilbur shook his head. "No. I wasn't doing anything."

Phil hummed, running his hand along the back of the couch before glancing back at Wilbur. "Y'know, I'm not gonna judge you for having a messy room or anything. My bedroom would be a disaster if the servants didn't keep it tidy for me."

"I just- I wasn't expecting you to drop by like this," Wilbur stammered.

At this, Phil's face softened. His icy eyes were impossibly warm as he sat down on the edge of the bed, wings splayed out on the comforter behind him before patting the spot next to him.

"Come sit with me."

Wilbur's legs felt like wood as he shuffled over to the bed. Why didn't he just come out and say it? Was he going to try and get Wilbur to admit it himself?

He sat down next to Phil, leaving a bit of space between them so their shoulders didn't brush. His heart was still racing, the saltwater drowning him as he forgot how to breathe all over again.

"Well, to get the main reason I'm here out of the way-" Wilbur sucked in a breath, bracing himself for the accusation that was about to get thrown in front of him, "I got a bit of a strange request relayed to me today."

...wait.

"Request?" Wilbur forced out.

"Yes. Puffy informed me that Quackity has requested to see the shuttle you and your brother arrived here in," Phil explained, a crease forming between his brows. "It was moved to one of our storage hangars once it was decided you'd be staying here for an extended period of time, but Quackity asked for it to be moved back into the main hangar so he can salvage it for parts. I would've denied him outright, but he told me that you gave him permission to do that."

*Oh.*

Wilbur was glad he was already sitting down, because if he wasn't he would've collapsed right then and there. They weren't caught. Quackity hadn't ratted them out. Phil just wanted to know why the fuck Quackity was asking to see his shuttle in the first place, which was something Wilbur had already assumed he'd be asked about.

Fuck. That was a heart attack he didn't need.

"Oh, yeah, that," Wilbur said, tension draining out of him as he fiddled with his hands in his lap. "That's true. I told Quackity he could take out a few spare parts from it to sell if he needed."

Immediately, Phil frowned. "Well, it's your shuttle so you're free to do what you like with it. But I don't really understand why you'd let him do something like that. Especially given your... history."

Well, this was the time to see if Wilbur's bullshitting skills were still up to par.

"We've long since moved past the whole, uh, altercation we had," he began, picking at a hangnail on his thumb. "Truthfully, I'm still pretty embarrassed by the way I acted the night we drank together. So when he mentioned he'd been looking for Eldingvegrian shuttle parts, I figured I owed him for how he hasn't held that night against me in any way."

Phil considered this, his frown deepening.

"Orpheus," he said, his voice low, "you forget that I've known Quackity longer than you have. He's the kind of businessman to seize any opportunity he gets, and has plenty of enemies to show for it."

Wilbur blinked. "What are you saying?"

Phil turned to face Wilbur more, and reached out to rest a hand on his arm. “You got very drunk with Quackity, and probably said some things you didn’t mean to tell him. If he’d holding any of that against you-”

“Wait, are you asking if Quackity’s *blackmailing* me?”

“Yes,” Phil answered without hesitation. “I don’t care what you said to him, but if he’s blackmailing you, you can tell me. I’ll take care of it.”

A shudder ran down Wilbur’s spine at the way Phil said *I’ll take care of it*. His tone didn’t change, but the implied threat was there all the same.

In a way, it was almost... comforting, to hear the protective threat in Phil’s words.

But that begged the question: why would Phil threaten Quackity for Wilbur? If Wilbur was being blackmailed into giving Quackity his shuttle so he could sell it for parts, why would Phil care? It wouldn’t affect the negotiations in any way. If anything, it would take away his and Tommy’s one surefire way of getting back off the planet, only giving Phil more of an advantage over them.

It didn’t make sense.

“No,” Wilbur said after a moment, shaking his head to try and silence the questions bouncing around his mind. “He’s- no, that’s not what’s happening at all.”

Doubt settled into the lines of Phil’s forehead, so Wilbur quickly continued with,

“Seriously, he’s not blackmailing me or anything. That shuttle is kind of shit anyway. It barely got us off Eldingvegr,” he explained, keeping his eyes on his hands. “Besides, it’s not like I have any need for it. I’m sure if we ever needed to go off planet you’d want me and Theseus on an Antarctic ship with you, right?”

At this, Phil’s frown smoothed out, and Wilbur knew he’d said the right thing.

“Well, I suppose you have a point,” Phil murmured, nodding to himself. “We have more than enough shuttles here for our personal use, and I trust the engineering of my ships far more than I’d trust anyone else’s.” He paused, considering this for a moment before looking up again. “If you’re sure, then I can call the hangar and tell them to grant Quackity’s request.”

Oh thank *fuck*.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Phil nodded again. “Alright. I’ll do that today then.” He went silent then, looking towards the door like he was considering getting up.

Instead though, he looked back at Wilbur and sighed.

“Now, onto the other thing I came here for.” He moved the hand he had resting on Wilbur’s arm up to his shoulder, pushing lightly so Wilbur straightened up to face him more. “You’ve

been acting off.”

And just like that, the fear was back.

“Wh- What?” Wilbur stuttered, nausea crawling up his throat. “No I haven’t.”

“Yes, you have,” Phil said gently. “I know it’s probably because of that fight you had with Theseus yesterday morning, but I just wanted to check in.”

*Did Phil know what was going on? If he did, why wouldn’t he have just said so when they were talking about the shuttle and Quackity? Was he still trying to get Wilbur to admit the plan outright? But what purpose would that serve? Was it another one of his games?*

Or maybe there wasn’t a game.

In the back of Wilbur’s head, doubt over his own paranoia rose again. Maybe there wasn’t a game Phil was playing here. Maybe Phil didn’t have the slightest clue about his and Tommy’s plan. Maybe the concern in his eyes was genuine.

Wilbur thought about what he’d told Ranboo the day before. That he trusted Phil. He was certain Ranboo had gone and reported that to Phil as soon as their conversation ended, and if that was the case, and Phil’s question was coming from a place of genuine concern...

Then Phil would have no reason to distrust any answer Wilbur gave him right now. Because he was under the impression that Wilbur trusted him.

Something like guilt pooled in his gut like oil on water—calming the rough waves, but sitting heavily inside of him all the same. His paranoia could be wrong. Even with Ranboo’s spying, Phil might still actually care about him. And Wilbur was lying to his face so he could run away.

“I wish I could tell you everything going on in my head,” Wilbur murmured, the truth slipping out without him thinking about it.

“Why can’t you?” Phil asked, his wing moving to wrap around Wilbur’s shoulders.

“I just... I can’t.”

He couldn’t ask the questions burning at the forefront of his mind. Even if he thought that Phil would give him the truth—even if he *commanded* Phil to tell him the truth—Wilbur wouldn’t be able to ask.

Wilbur didn’t even know what answer he wanted. Both possibilities were terrifying in their own way.

“I know what that’s like. When there’s so much going on in your head, you don’t have the slightest fucking clue how to put it into words,” Phil said, his wing pushing Wilbur close to his side.

That wasn’t it. But Wilbur nodded like it was.

“I-” His voice cracked, and he winced. “I’m scared, Phil,” he confessed in a whisper, the oil coating his insides and making him want to throw up.

Fear had wrapped around Wilbur like an iron vice. It was there in every breath he took and every word he said. He was shaking, and he curled into Phil’s side, desperate for the warmth the Ice King shouldn’t have had, but did anyway.

Phil only hesitated for half of a second before wrapping Wilbur in a hug. “What are you afraid of?”

*So much.*

There was so much for Wilbur to be afraid of. Like Phil finding out about his plan. Quackity or Jack betraying them. Their escape failing. Their escape succeeding. Dream, and what he would do if he found them again.

Finding out that everything Phil had said to him was a lie.

Finding out that everything Phil had said to him was the truth.

Wilbur couldn’t put a voice to any of his fears, so he stayed silent. After nearly a minute, Phil hummed.

“You’ll figure things out with Theseus soon,” Phil reassured him, wings completely engulfing Wilbur. “It’s all going to work out, little bird.”

It wasn’t, but Wilbur buried his face in Phil’s shoulder, and let himself pretend for just a moment anyway.



Eventually, Phil was called back to his duties, and Wilbur found himself alone again.

He knew that he should be using this time to prepare. To come up with every step of his plan so he’d know exactly what to do the second Quackity called Jack. For all he knew, it could be tonight, and he wanted to be ready.

But Wilbur couldn’t bring himself to do any of that.

It was like his conversation with Phil had sucked out all the nervous energy that had been flowing through him the entire day. His mind was no longer racing with questions and worries because it was empty. *He* was empty. The guilt, the fear, the anger—all of it had drained away, leaving him a hollow shell.

The voice in the back of his head kept asking him why he was doing this. Why he was planning to leave. And he had to remind himself that it didn’t matter how genuine Phil’s worry seemed to be, because it was probably a lie.

Hours passed. Dinner arrived at his door, and Wilbur forced himself to eat despite it tasting like chalk in his mouth because it gave him something to do.

The night dragged on. Wilbur began to wonder if he should go to sleep. Surely Quackity wouldn't send the message this late. It was almost time for Jack's shift to end after all.

But then, just when Wilbur was debating changing into his pajamas, there was a knock at the door.

Each step to the door was a monumental effort. His limbs felt like lead, and his heart was pounding in his ears, the beats reverberating through his entire body.

Before he opened it though, he squeezed his eyes shut, and silently begged the universe *not yet*.

The door hissed. Jack stood on the other side, once again wearing the face of a man escorting him to the gallows.

"Quackity wants to see you," Jack said, his shoulders rigid.

...fuck.

Wilbur barely processed the walk to Quackity's room. It was late—most of the palace residents had turned in for the night, leaving the cavernous halls as silent and dark as could be. Although Wilbur had walked through these halls at night plenty of times before, it was as if he was seeing them for the very first time.

Harsh lines. Dark metal.

Cold. Sharp. *Terrifying*.

At some point, these foreign halls had stopped being foreign to Wilbur. The smooth stone was familiar, the chill in the air something to be expected. When he passed by a window, the glittering city buried deep within the ice didn't surprise him. It was comforting, almost.

Wilbur forced himself to walk by it without a second glance.

They arrived at Quackity's room far too quickly for Wilbur's liking. Despite the staccato rhythm his heartbeat had taken up, he didn't pause to take a breather. Instead, he walked right up to the door, forcing his wooden arm to knock before stepping back.

A beat passed.

Then,

"Fucking finally," Quackity muttered, grabbing Wilbur's arm as soon as the door was open. "The guard knows, right?"

"Uh, yeah, that's why I had him call you."

Quackity nodded, and gestured for Jack to come closer. "Both of you get in here then. Don't want anyone spotting him in the hall and figuring out you're in here."

With that, Quackity dragged Wilbur inside, with Jack quickly following behind.

As soon as the door was shut, Quackity dropped Wilbur's arm, shoving his hands in his pockets and making his way over to his desk. "First off, do either of you want a drink?"

Wilbur thought back to his last drinking experience with Quackity and shook his head. Meanwhile, Jack nodded.

"Please, I fucking need one," Jack huffed, making his way across the room to the desk.

"Pick your poison," Quackity said, gesturing to the row of liquor bottles behind him. Jack immediately went for the Nonan gin Wilbur had gotten far too fucked up on last time, pouring a few fingers worth into the glass Quackity offered him before pouring some in Quackity's glass as well.

The two downed their drinks at the same time, Jack wincing at the taste while Quackity just hummed. Then, Jack straightened his shoulders and nodded at Quackity, while Quackity looked back at Wilbur.

"Alright, I needed that in case I get executed tonight," Quackity said, setting down his glass behind him. "I just got back from the hangar, and you'll be happy to hear your shuttle is ready to go whenever you are."

"It's not missing any parts?" Wilbur asked.

Quackity shook his head. "Nope. I did a full rundown of everything and all systems are functional."

Holy shit.

"Okay," Wilbur muttered, nodding to himself with wide eyes. "That's- yeah, okay. That's what we needed."

"You don't seem very happy about that," Quackity commented, narrowing his eyes.

"No, no I am. I just- I wasn't expecting it to happen so fast," Wilbur told him, shaking himself off. A few seconds ticked by, and Wilbur glanced at the door. "Shit. I shouldn't waste any time. I- I need to get Tommy, and then we need-"

"Before you go," Quackity cut him off, walking over to one of the metal boxes in the corner of the room. Wilbur and Jack both watched as he dug around inside, pulling out a few smaller containers and stacking them on the coffee table behind him.

Then, Quackity took out a large tote bag from the metal box. He placed the smaller, stacked containers inside, and tested the weight before holding the bag out for Wilbur to take.

"What is this?" Wilbur asked, slinging the bag over his shoulder and peering at the containers inside.

“Just some supplies,” Quackity shrugged, avoiding Wilbur’s eyes as he went back to the desk to pour himself a second drink. “Nonperishable food bars, some water, and a credit chip with some emergency funds on it.”

Wilbur furrowed his brows. “Wh- Quackity, you didn’t have to-”

“The credits are a loan,” Quackity said, cutting him off. “You’re gonna pay me back with the blaziphane you promised, got it?”

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Wilbur nodded. “Of course.”

Quackity seemed satisfied at this. He downed the second drink, wincing this time as the glass slammed on the table behind him.

A moment of silence hung between them. Although the bag wasn’t heavy, it suddenly felt like an impossible weight for Wilbur to carry.

Then, Quackity walked across the room so they were face to face again. The feather tattoos rustled in agitation as he folded his arms over his chest, looking up to meet Wilbur’s eyes.

“You better not fucking die, Orpheus.”

Despite the anxiety thrumming through his veins, Wilbur smiled. “Oh Quackity, come now, you can call me Wilbur.”

Quackity stared at him for a moment, shocked into silence. Then, he huffed out a laugh and shook his head.

“I’ll call you by your personal name when you come back with my blaziphane,” Quackity said, looking as though he was fighting back a smile himself. “Now get the fuck out of here.”

It was a challenge. One that Wilbur would gladly accept.

“You’ll be seeing me soon.”

With that, Wilbur gave Quackity one final wave as he and Jack left the room.

Everything had been put into place. All the pieces were ready to go.

This was the beginning of the end.

## Chapter End Notes

the escape plan has begun :)

as I mentioned, I had to split this chapter in half, meaning chapter 26 is already complete and ready to go. I'm going to post it tomorrow morning, so be on the lookout for that!



until then, enjoy chapter 25 :) this was a lot of fun conversations to write.

will the escape succeed? will it fail? tune in next time!

anyway, ty guys so much as always for the kind words you leave on this fic. it's insane to me how we're getting close to the end now. I'm definitely not gonna reach my goal of finishing this before the end of the year, but hopefully I'll finish it soon! it's been such a wild journey though and I'm so so proud of this fic. thank you all so much for being here with me <3

ok that's all for now! please leave a comment with your thoughts, and be on the lookout for chapter 26 tomorrow!

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# echoing in his bones

## Chapter Summary

The plan is set into motion.

## Chapter Notes

and we are at part 2!!

like I said in my authors notes yesterday, I had to split this chapter in half. so you get two chapter updates in 2 days! this one is pretty insane, so brace yourselves because shit is gonna go down

I won't keep you waiting. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As soon as the door slid shut behind them, the cold threaded itself under Wilbur's coat, chilling him to his core. The smile disappeared from his face as fear consumed him once more.

Jack's shoulder brushed against his own. Wilbur took a breath to try and steady himself, but it only brought more burning salt with it.

One step at a time. The shuttle had been secured. Now, he needed Tommy.

Wilbur turned down the hall towards Tommy's room, Jack hurrying to keep up with him. They only made it down a few doors though before he jolted to a stop, and felt Jack bump against his back.

"Wil, what the-"

"Wilbur?"

Aimsey's voice echoed down the hallway, their dark eyes pinning Wilbur where he stood.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck- why did it have to be Aimsey of all people he ran into this late at night?

"Uh, hey Aimsey," he called out, giving them an awkward wave.

The two stared at each other for a few moments. Aimsey was dressed in pajamas, knit cap still pulled low over their head and flowers pressed tight against their cheeks as if they were trying to shield themselves from the cool night air. Wilbur was still wearing the clothes he'd put on this morning, but Aimsey's eyes fell right onto the bag Quackity had given him.

*Fuck.*

"What are you doing?" Aimsey asked, taking a step towards him.

"I- I was just visiting Quackity," Wilbur stammered, figuring a half-truth would come across better than an outright lie.

Another step closer. "This late at night?"

"We were sharing a nightcap."

"And the bag?" They pushed, now standing right in front of him.

"A gift he gave me," Wilbur shrugged.

Aimsey considered this for a moment. Their eyes scanned him up and down, and he had to resist the urge to shrink under their gaze. But it was then he noticed something about *them*, and realized this was his first time actually seeing Aimsey face to face since before his fight with Tommy.

It would be kind to say they looked tired. Their eyes were bloodshot, with dark bags sitting underneath them. The flowers on their cheeks were drooping, while the ones in their hair almost looked as though they were wilting. When his eyes fell to their hands, he noticed their nails had been bit down, and there was a bit of blood on their thumb from where they'd been picking at a hangnail.

"Wait, are you okay?" Wilbur asked without thinking.

Aimsey blinked, seemingly confused that Wilbur was asking about them when he was the one in a compromising position.

"I'm fine," they quickly said. "But what-"

"Okay, that's a bold-faced lie and we both know it," Wilbur cut them off, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. "You look like shit, Aimsey."

"That's a bit rude," Aimsey shot back, scowling now.

Wilbur blinked. "Aimsey. Come on."

Aimsey's scowl deepened. "Fine. If you wanna know, I'm still not being listened to by the other ambassadors and the stress is keeping me up at night, so I'm pretty goddamn exhausted," they explained, folding their arms over their chest. "Now, since I answered your question, you owe me an explanation for what you're doing here."

“I just told you, I was visiting-”

“Bullshit!” Aimsey exclaimed. “I’m not an idiot, Wilbur. You’re out here in the dead of night, carrying a giant bag and walking right in the direction of Tommy’s room, looking like you’re scared out of your mind. Something’s going on.”

Wilbur winced. Just because Aimsey was a kind, good-hearted person, that didn’t make them a fool. He was well-aware of that.

Wait.

Aimsey... Aimsey was good. They’d always been inherently *good*. Like Jack, they never pushed Wilbur for information, but they wanted to make sure he was okay. Unlike Jack though, they hadn’t been born an Antarctic Empire citizen. Floslium was taken over by the Empire. The same fate Eldingvegr was going to meet if he and Tommy didn’t get off Zephyrs IV as soon as possible.

Right now, Wilbur didn’t have time to try and parse where Aimsey’s loyalties were. But at one point in time, Aimsey had been Wilbur’s friend.

“Look, Aimsey, I can’t tell you what’s going on,” Wilbur said, looking down to meet their eyes. “I know the last time we saw each other was a bit of a shitfest, and I know I got way out of line with some of the things I said, but if you were ever my friend, I need you to do me a favor right now.”

The exhaustion in Aimsey’s eyes faded as they leaned in closer. “Wil, what are you talking about?”

Wilbur bent down so he was level with Aimsey’s ear, and whispered, “Just go to your room, and don’t tell anyone you saw me out here until the morning.”

“Wha-”

“I have somewhere I need to be,” Wilbur said as he straightened back up, brushing past Aimsey to hurry down the hall. “Just- please, do that for me!”

“I don’t- *what?*”

Ignoring Aimsey’s question, Wilbur continued towards Tommy’s room, Jack hurrying close behind. He listened for the sound of Aimsey’s footsteps following him and Jack, but quickly realized they weren’t there.

He waited a bit longer. Continued listening for a third set of shoes against the stone.

Nothing. Aimsey wasn’t following them.

All Wilbur could do right now was hope that Aimsey did what he asked and kept quiet until the morning. He was fairly certain they would, because they would probably assume they could ask him what he was doing tomorrow.

Hopefully they wouldn't blame themselves when they learned about his and Tommy's escape.

A few more doors, and they reached Tommy's room. The one that Wilbur had shared with him for the majority of their time on Zephyr IV.

Deja vu flooded over him at the sight of the door again. He hadn't been down this hallway since the day Tommy called him a bastard. He'd been too scared of running into his little brother to venture to this part of the castle. Terrified of a confrontation they still haven't properly had.

At least the fear racing through him right now wasn't because of Tommy.

Going right up to the door, Wilbur tried the lock, jumping when it worked immediately. He would've thought that Tommy had it changed after their fight, but apparently that wasn't the case.

The door hissed open, and he heard a yelp from inside.

"What the-"

Wilbur poked his head in, and Tommy—who was sitting on the bed fully dressed—breathed a sigh of relief.

"What the fuck, Wilbur?!"

Winced at how loud he was, Wilbur grabbed Jack's shoulder and dragged him inside the room. Only when the door slid shut behind them did he finally speak.

"You're gonna wake up the whole fucking palace with all your shouting!"

Tommy scowled, but Wilbur could tell there was no true heat behind it. "I wouldn't have shouted if you didn't scare the shit out of me! Have you heard of knocking?"

"I thought- okay, you know what, never mind," Wilbur huffed, shaking his head. "Anyway, Tommy, are you ready to go?"

Tommy opened his mouth to reply, but froze when he noticed Jack standing behind Wilbur. "Wait, so you told him and he's-"

"Yes, he knows what's going on," Wilbur explained, adjusting the bag on his shoulder again. "Did you get the stuff I told you to?"

Perking up, Tommy hopped off the bed and ran to the couch, where a large tote bag similar to the one Wilbur had on his shoulder was sitting. "Yup! My natural charm still works on cooks even on different planets!" He bragged, flashing Wilbur a cheeky smirk. "I just told them I had really bad insomnia but I didn't want to have to wake them up for any food in the middle of the night, and they gave me a shit ton of snacks to keep up here. Also, I threw the clothes they gave us in the bag too. If we need to hide out on an Outer Sector planet, I figured we could barter with them."

Thank fuck. Although he had faith in Tommy, it was a relief to know that his part of the plan had gone off without a hitch.

“That’s great. Quackity also gave us some supplies, along with some emergency money,” Wilbur told him, showing off his own bag. “Our shuttle is waiting for us in the hangar. I had Quackity look over it, and he said it’s fully functional and ready to go.”

Tommy took a shaky breath, nodding and glancing around the room as he slung his own bag over his shoulder. “Shit, so that- that’s it, huh? We’ve done everything.”

Wilbur nodded, shoving down the nerves rising up his throat and dragging a hand through his hair. “Yup. We’ve done everything we need to.”

Silence fell between them. The brothers shared a look, and Wilbur once again found himself wondering if this was the right choice.

If this failed, they’d lose every advantage they had with Phil and Techno. Any say they had in the negotiations would crumble to dust. The relationships they’d built with the Emperor and the Imperator would be ruined. Not to mention, Jack and Quackity would probably both be arrested for helping them.

And if this succeeded... then they’d have to keep themselves from being hunted down by Essempi. Wilbur kept saying he’d work something out, but the truth of it was, Wilbur didn’t have the slightest clue how he was going to keep Dream from finding them.

“Tommy-”

“No,” Tommy snapped, cutting him off. “I know what you’re gonna say, Wilbur, but we’re not backing down now.”

Shit. Curse Tommy for being able to read him so well.

“I just... are you sure?” Wilbur asked, dropping his voice. “Because I keep thinking about everything that could go wrong, and I don’t know if it’s worth it.”

Tommy considered Wilbur’s words for a moment, nodding to himself before looking up to meet Wilbur’s eyes again.

“No matter what happens, we’re in this together, right?”

Sucking in a breath, Wilbur nodded. “We are.”

“Then we’ll figure it out as we go,” Tommy said with a kind of confidence Wilbur wished he had. “Let’s hurry the fuck up and get out of here.”

Before Wilbur could say anything else, Tommy was opening the door to the room and hurrying out into the hallway, leaving Jack and Wilbur rushing to keep up.

The trio’s footsteps echoed off the stone walls in time with the sound of their bags slamming against their sides. Jack moved to the front while Tommy stayed in between him and Wilbur,

and once again, Wilbur found himself being taken back to the night of the invasion.

Every time they stopped at a corner, Jack holding a hand up so he could look around the wall to see if the coast was clear, Wilbur remembered when he'd been on the lookout for Essempi soldiers in his own home. His shoulders were tense, and he could barely hear himself think with how loud the blood rushing in his ears was. When they ducked into a shadowy alcove to hide from a few servants, Wilbur noticed Tommy's freckles glowing in the dim light, and forgot how to breathe as his mind flashed with the mental image of Tommy crouched behind him in the crawlspace.

By the time they got to the train platform, Wilbur was ready to fall apart because of his nerves. His hands trembled violently, his fingers gripping the strap of the bag Quackity had given him tight enough to turn the knuckles white. His breathing was stuttered, and there was a *push and pull* sensation hitting against his chest. The waves moving in and out, but not in a constant way he could count. No, these waves were random. Slamming into him every few seconds without warning, in a pattern he couldn't even hope to decipher.

Thankfully, the train platform was empty at this time of night. Jack led them to a single train car sitting still on the rails, and Wilbur remembered when Phil had taken him to that ice cave so many months ago.

It was one of the first times Phil had done something for Wilbur that didn't seem to be a clear power move. There was no threat that came with him showing Wilbur the stars trapped in the ice above their heads. No insults or ominous words. Phil had called it a field trip.

*"I had a feeling you'd like it, little bird."*

Wilbur's eyes burnt at the memory.

"Isn't there supposed to be a guard here?" He asked instead, remembering how a guard had driven the train to the ice cave for him and Phil.

"There is," Jack said, pressing a few buttons on a control panel. "It's me."

Tommy frowned. "What?"

"The guy whose shift it was wasn't feeling great, so I told him I'd cover for him," Jack explained, not looking at either of them. "Honestly, in retrospect that's kind of fucking stupid. I'm gonna be placed here so they'll know I would've had to have seen you two when you left, meaning it won't be hard to figure out I helped you."

Although he was hiding his nerves well, Wilbur could see that his own hands were shaking as the train doors opened up behind him. There were going to be consequences for what Jack was doing. Wilbur knew that. But he thought he'd be able to lie and say he didn't know anything. This though-

Wilbur's thought was cut off by a new voice.

"Tommy?"

Jumping like he'd been shocked, Tommy whipped around, face twisting into a scowl when he locked eyes with the person at the other end of the platform.

"Ranboo," he hissed. "What are you doing here?"

Wilbur's heart skipped a beat in his chest as he looked over his shoulder, and saw Ranboo making his way towards the two of them. Like always, his shoulders were hunched, and he was twisting his dual-toned hands in front of him. His eyes darted around nervously, and Wilbur noticed how he seemed to be avoiding Tommy's gaze.

"Uh, me?" Ranboo asked, pointing to himself. "I was just going back to my room when I heard voices, but what are *you* doing here?" His brows were furrowed, the confusion on his face only growing when he glanced at Wilbur. "And why is Orpheus here?"

Behind them, Jack had frozen in place. Wilbur felt rooted to the ground, unable to take a step forward even if he wanted.

Fucking *Ranboo*.

A suffocating silence hung over the platform. Tommy clenched his jaw, eyes flickering between Wilbur and Ranboo like he was silently begging for Wilbur to tell him what to say. But Wilbur- he was at a loss. With Aimsey, he'd just been walking down the hallway at night. Sure, the bag made him a bit suspicious, but an escape wasn't going to be the first conclusion they jumped to.

But now they were on the train platform that led out of the palace. The train was already activated and ready to go. Both he and Tommy had heavy bags over their shoulders, and were fully-dressed despite how late it was.

There was no excuse they could come up with to explain this, and everyone in the room knew it.

Wilbur could practically see the moment the words *fuck it* crossed through Tommy's head.

"We're leaving, Ranboo," Tommy snapped, taking a step towards him. "Me and Wil are getting off this horrible fucking planet and going somewhere else."

Ranboo's eyes widened. "Wh- What? You can't- no, you- why?! You're safe here! Why would you leave?!"

"Safe?" A bitter laugh echoed through the train platform, scraping out of Tommy's throat in a way that seemed borderline painful. Wilbur and Ranboo both winced at the sound. "We're not fucking safe here, Ranboo! Safety is bullshit when you're surrounded by a bunch of liars!"

"Liars?" Ranboo squeaked out, stumbling back when Tommy shoved his finger into his chest. "What do you mean?"

Suddenly, Tommy grabbed the front of Ranboo's shirt, yanking him down so they were eye to eye. "Drop the fucking act," Tommy hissed, his eyes alight with icy flames. "You know



exactly what I'm talking about."

Ranboo tried to pull away, but Tommy refused to let go. "No, I don't!"

"We heard you!" Tommy shouted, letting go of the shirt to shove Ranboo against the wall. "Me and Wil heard you talking to Techno!"

For a brief second, Ranboo's eyes widened. Then, he froze, and started shaking his head as he tried to get out of Tommy's grip. "Tommy, please, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ranboo," Wilbur cut in, making his and Tommy's heads snap to him. "Tell me if this sounds familiar: 'Tommy was easy! You told me to befriend him when he got here and it was fine! I can do it, I promise!'" He tilted his voice to mock Ranboo's accent, and a sliver of satisfaction curled through him when he saw the enderian shrink back against the wall.

"We heard you," Tommy repeated, no longer shouting as he pressed against Ranboo's shoulders. "You've been spying on us the whole time. Spying on *me*."

Ranboo's chest rapidly rose and fell, his mismatched eyes snapping around the room like he was trying to find some means of escape. But Tommy was stronger than him, and he wasn't loosening his grip anytime soon.

A few beats passed. Then, he let out a breath, and stopped fighting.

"Fine," he admitted, eyes falling to the ground. "You're right. I've been giving Techno and Phil reports on you two for... a while now."

A beat passed. Wilbur waited for Ranboo to say more, but he was silent.

"That's it?" Tommy asked before Wilbur could. "That's all you have to fucking say for yourself?!"

"I don't know what you want me to say!" Ranboo exclaimed, lifting his head again.

"I dunno! How about a, 'I know it was wrong' or an, 'I wish I hadn't done it', or maybe even just a fucking 'I'm sorry'! Did you ever think of that?" Tommy yelled, slamming his free hand on the wall next to Ranboo's head.

Ranboo flinched at the sound. "I- I'm sorry? I don't know why you're so upset! I was mostly just telling Techno stuff you already told him yourself!"

Fear momentarily forgotten, Wilbur clenched his jaw as the burning in his lungs faded away. He took a step closer to Ranboo, while Tommy dropped the arms holding him to the wall.

Ranboo stumbled forward, nearly falling flat on his face before catching his footing at the last second. Neither Wilbur or Tommy moved to help him.

"Did you just say you don't know why I'm upset?" Tommy asked, his voice having dropped to a low whisper.

“I did,” Ranboo said, straightening up and taking a step back from both the brothers, although he was stuck between them and the wall.

Tommy blinked. “Our entire friendship was a lie, and you don’t get why I’d be upset about that.”

“What? It wasn’t a lie,” Ranboo said, shaking his head. “Yeah, sure, Techno told me to become friends with you two so I could tell him things you might not wanna say to him or Phil, but I did it because I was trying to help you!”

Before either Tommy or Wilbur could figure out how the fuck to respond to something as stupid as that, another new voice cut in.

“You *WHAT?*”

Wilbur cursed under his breath at the sound of Aimsey’s voice. He squeezed his eyes shut as a new pair of footsteps ran onto the platform, only opening them when Aimsey had appeared from the shadows a few feet away from the brothers and Ranboo.

“Aimsey? What the fuck are you doing here?!” Tommy asked.

At the same time, Wilbur exclaimed, “I told you to stay out of it!”

Tommy snapped his head towards Wilbur. “You knew they were here?!”

“I- I ran into them on my way to your room and I panicked!” Wilbur shot back.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?!”

“I thought I handled it!”

“Well clearly you fucking didn’t because-”

“ENOUGH!”

Aimsey’s shout silenced the brothers. They both looked back at the flora, and Wilbur was almost relieved to see that they were more focused on Ranboo than either of them.

“I don’t know what you guys are all doing here, but I also don’t really care right now.” They took a step towards Ranboo, and he pressed himself as far back against the wall as he could. “Ranboo, did I hear you correctly when you said you’ve been reporting everything Wil and Tommy say to Technoblade?”

Their voice was low. There was a tightness in their shoulders Wilbur had never seen before. It was so unfamiliar to see them so wound up, that it took him a few moments to even recognize the thing radiating off of them as anger.

Aimsey wasn’t just upset. They were *furious*.

“You- You heard correctly,” Ranboo stammered out. “But I was just trying to help!”

“How the fuck was lying to us and reporting everything we said to Phil and Techno supposed to ‘help’ us?” Wilbur snapped, barely concealed rage sitting under his words.

“It was gonna make the negotiations easier!” Ranboo defended, holding his arms close to his chest.

“Yeah, easier for Techno and Phil!” Tommy exclaimed.

“No, no that wasn’t-” Ranboo took a stuttered breath, squeezing his eyes shut as he shook his head. “I was *helping*! I swear!”

“I can’t believe this,” Aimsey cut in, all their flowers facing him. “I defended you over and over again. I told Wilbur he was being unfair for not trusting you. I told Tommy you were just socially awkward when he kept asking me why you were so nosy. I thought you genuinely wanted to be friends with them, so I did everything I could to help you.” They sucked in a sharp breath. “Was our friendship real, Ranboo?”

Ranboo flinched. “What? Of course it was!”

“How am I supposed to believe you?!” Aimsey snapped. “I’m part of the diplomatic team for Floslium. How do I know you didn’t just befriend me to get insider information on us?!”

“I- I didn’t!”

“Oh fuck, I’ve told you so much stuff about our discussions,” Aimsey muttered, dragging their hands down their face. “This whole time I thought I could trust you but- but-”

“Have you ever told the truth, Ranboo?” Wilbur jumped in, drawing all eyes back to him. “Or are you just so afraid of people disliking you that you just do and say whatever they ask?”

For the first time since this conversation began, Ranboo didn’t have a response to that. His lower lip wobbled as he curled in on himself, shoving both his hands in his pockets.

Aimsey had turned away from him, and was pacing back and forth, pushing their hands through their hair like they were lost in thought. Tommy’s shoulders were rigid, and despite how cold his voice was, Wilbur could see tears glittering in the corners of his eyes.

Behind them all, Jack was still waiting at the control panel. He stood completely still, like he thought that if he didn’t move, Aimsey and Ranboo wouldn’t notice him.

So far, it seemed to be working given that neither of them had so much as glanced in his direction.

Wilbur focused back on Ranboo, his eyes being drawn to the hands he still had in his pockets. It was then Wilbur saw something glowing from inside the fabric, but right before he could open his mouth to say something,

*“Ranboo, STOP!”*

Tommy's Voice echoed off the walls, reverberating through Wilbur's bones and chilling him to his core.

The effect was instantaneous. Ranboo froze in place, hand half in his pocket, eyes wide and lip still wobbling.

One second passed. Then another.

Wilbur felt like he was going to throw up.

"Tommy-"

"Not right now, Wilbur!" Tommy snapped, not tearing his eyes away from Ranboo. "We heard Techno tell you that you didn't have to spy anymore, but you begged him to let you continue. Why? Why did you do it? Why did you betray me even when you knew I'd already been through this before?" He paused, shutting his eyes and taking two deep breaths.

Then,

*"Tell me the truth,"* Tommy commanded.

Again, the effect was immediate.

"I wanted to prove myself, and I wanted to give Techno and Phil a reason to like me," Ranboo admitted, eyes widening as the words slipped out on their own.

A spineless people-pleaser through and through. Wilbur was annoyed at his own surprise.

"Did you feel bad about it at all?" Tommy pushed.

"No," Ranboo answered, looking horrified at his own mouth's betrayal.

Suddenly, Aimsey stepped forward again. "Did you ever report anything I told you about Floslium or the diplomats to Technoblade and Philza?"

"Yes, but only once."

Fear flashed over Aimsey's face. "What was it?!"

Before Ranboo could answer though, the effects of Tommy's Voice wore off. Stiffening, he threw himself back against the wall, breath coming in short, panicked gasps as he whipped his head around the room.

"You- You can use your Voice!" Ranboo gasped, eyes finally settling on Tommy. "You told me you couldn't!"

"I lied," Tommy shot back.

Ranboo stared at Tommy for a moment, pure terror radiating off of him in waves.

Then, he reached into his pocket again, pulling out a holo-pad with trembling hands.

“Go to-” Tommy coughed, clearly struggling with his Voice. *”Go to sleep!”*

It was a far weaker command than the last two he’d said, but it did the trick. Ranboo went limp, eyes fluttering shut as he dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The holo-pad was knocked out of his hands, skidding across the floor where it landed right at Aimsey’s feet.

Aimsey and Wilbur locked eyes. He opened his mouth, but they immediately held their hands up.

“I’m not gonna touch it,” they said, before kicking the holo-pad across the platform where no one could reach it.

Wilbur frowned. “Why not?”

“Are you kidding? You think I trust anyone on this goddamn planet after that?” They exclaimed, gesturing to Ranboo’s limp form. “If you wanna leave, then get out while you still can. I’m not gonna try and stop you.”

Tommy narrowed his eyes. “What-” he winced, his voice scratchy from what he’d just done, “what are you gonna do then?”

“Right now? I’m gonna stay here and wait for him to wake up because I need to know what the fuck he told Technoblade about the flora.”

“He might’ve already called guards here. Will you tell them what happened?” Wilbur asked, stepping back towards the train.

“Wil, Tommy, I know you don’t trust me and I get why now,” Aimsey told them, kneeling down on the ground. “You can knock me out if you want, but I’m not going to tell them anything. I swear.”

Wilbur considered this. He considered the way their shoulders shook and their hands curled in and out of fists. He considered the pure betrayal in their voice when Ranboo admitted everything. He considered how instead of being afraid when they realized he and Tommy could use their Voices, they jumped right into asking Ranboo questions.

Aimsey hadn’t been in on anything. They were betrayed, just like him and Tommy.

“Get on the ground and pretend like you got knocked out,” Wilbur said after a moment, reaching out to grab Tommy’s shoulder so he could drag him towards the train. “Tommy’s Voice is weak. Ranboo won’t be asleep for long. When he wakes up, you need to pretend like the same thing happened to you.”

Nodding, Aimsey laid down on the ground next to Ranboo. “Got it. Anything else?”

“If you can, try to hold them off from getting to the hangar. Distract them, act like you’re panicking, anything you can think of to slow them down.” He paused, now shoulder to shoulder with Jack as they all stood in front of the doors to the train. “And stay safe, Aimsey.”

“You too.”

Letting out an unsteady breath, Wilbur turned to Jack.

“Can you have the train take us to the hangar?”

Jack’s jaw was clenched as he glanced between Aimsey and the train. “I want to,” he said, chewing the inside of his cheek. “But Wil I- I could get executed for this, y’know? Like I said, they’ll know I was on shift and that I helped you.”

Wilbur considered this for a moment. Even if Aimsey didn’t say a word about what just transpired, the records were going to show that Jack was here no matter what. He was culpable. There was no getting around that.

Suddenly, the waves crashing inside of Wilbur’s head fell silent all at the same time, and he knew what he had to do.

“Not unless I give you plausible deniability,” Wilbur said quietly, avoiding Jack’s eyes.

Jack frowned. “What do you-”

*”Take us to the hangar.”*

Although it had been months since Wilbur had even tried to use his Voice, it felt as natural as breathing to push the command into his words. He wasn’t using his full power. No, Wilbur wasn’t going to do that unless he had no other choice. But his Voice echoed all the same, scraping in his throat and no doubt vibrating all the way into Jack’s bones.

Oil slick guilt roiled in his stomach as Jack’s eyes glazed over, and he turned to make his way onto the train. Tommy gave him a wide-eyed look, but Wilbur avoided his gaze, not wanting to see the judgement there for what he’d just done to their friend.

As he stepped onto the train, cold fingers wrapped around his own. He hesitated, eyes burning again as his throat ached with the remnants of his ability.

Tommy squeezed his fingers. Wilbur squeezed back.

They stepped onto the train together. Jack was silent as he pressed the button to shut the doors, and Wilbur met Aimsey’s eyes through the glass.

A single nod. An understanding they’d finally reached.

And then, the train was off.

The last time he and Tommy had ridden along this part of the track was when they’d just arrived on Zephyrs IV. Despite the terror both of them had been feeling, Tommy had pressed his face against the glass to see the city in all its splendor, with Wilbur doing the same.

Neither of them looked out the glass at the city beyond. Even as it glittered under the blue and white light of the ice above it, Wilbur didn’t want to see everything he was leaving

behind.

It hurt.

Tommy's hand gripped his tight enough to make his fingers ache. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Tommy wince every time he swallowed, and could only imagine how badly his throat hurt after using his Voice that much after so little practice. It was a miracle he'd been able to pull off those commands in the first place. Like when they escaped from Eldingvegr, it was probably more to do with Tommy's emotions fueling it than anything else, but that could only get him so far.

He tried to avoid looking at Jack as the train sped along the rail, not wanting to see that hollow stare he no doubt was wearing. It was for the best. He knew that. It was the only way he could escape punishment for helping them with all of this.

That didn't make it okay though. Wilbur knew that.

Outside the glass, the world went dark as they entered the tunnel that led into the hangar. Tommy pressed closer to Wilbur's side, and Wilbur squeezed his fingers again. He wasn't going anywhere.

The darkness disappeared as the terminal station came into view. There was a quiet hum as the train slowed to a stop, the doors sliding open to the empty platform.

Wilbur and Tommy stood at the same time. Jack was blinking, coming back to himself.

"You-"

*"Escort us to the hangar and help our shuttle leave,"* Wilbur commanded before Jack could get another word out.

Again, that glazed over look returned to Jack's eyes, and he was silent as he stepped off the train. Wilbur gulped, but Tommy didn't let him falter. He dragged him along, the two hurrying off the train with Jack following right beside them.

It was eerie how empty the terminal station was at this time of night. The only light came from emergency strips lining the floor, casting everything in shades of red. As they left the terminal station behind, Wilbur jumped at the strange shadows their figures cast along the patch metal walls, the iron grip of fear having returned tenfold the moment they'd left the palace behind.

The last time Wilbur had been here, the place had been buzzing with life. People of all different species rushing about in blue fatigues, footsteps and conversation intermixing to create a kind of chaotic symphony.

Now, the only sound came from their combined footsteps. Boots dinged against metal, and Wilbur shivered at how much colder it was over here compared to inside the palace. Beside him, Tommy picked up the pace, and Wilbur followed suit.

Finally, after what couldn't have been more than a minute of walking but felt like hours, the hangar itself came into view. The lights flickered on the moment they stepped foot inside, likely due to the presence of a motion detector.

Immediately, Jack turned towards a large console set up against a wall. He began to press a few buttons, and Wilbur heard a mechanical whirring as the platform they'd entered the hangar through rose from the ground, a hole in the ceiling opening up for them to fly out of.

When Wilbur looked back at the shuttles in the hangar, he almost cried with relief when he spotted an Eldingvegr crest engraved into white metal.

"Holy fuck, it's really there," Tommy breathed out.

Wilbur laughed and nodded. "It's there. We can leave."

He and Tommy exchanged a look of pure relief. This was it. They were so close to being free.

Glancing back at Jack, Wilbur's chest ached. His glazed eyes were focused on the console in front of him, and Wilbur knew that even if he tried to talk to him, he wouldn't be able to respond because of the command.

He hoped that Jack would understand.

"You ready to go?" Wilbur asked, forcing himself to focus back on Tommy.

Tommy nodded. "Yup, sure a-"

He was cut off by the sound of an engine.

Not a shuttle engine. Something smaller. Faster. Something coming down the tunnel they'd just entered the hangar from.

Both their heads whipped to the hangar entrance, and fear shot through Wilbur like a knife to the chest.

It was a motorized cart. No doubt used for transport of some kind, and it was heading full speed straight at them.

Before Wilbur could even take a step towards their shuttle, the car was in the hangar, screeching to a stop. Someone kicked the door open, and a flash of pink hair told Wilbur exactly who was inside.

"Stop-"

"Run!" Wilbur shouted.

He and Tommy turned to book it for the shuttle, holding onto each other for dear life, but they only got a few steps before Tommy shrieked.



There was a mess of hands and feathers as someone tried to grab Wilbur, while someone else grabbed Tommy. Their hands were ripped apart as Wilbur tripped over his own feet, falling flat on the ground.

Someone tried to wrap their arms around him. Wilbur screamed and elbowed them blindly, hearing a familiar voice grunt in pain when his arm met flesh. He could hear Tommy shouting curses behind him. Scrambling to his feet, he stumbled back towards the shuttle.

His chest was heaving as he tried to make sense of what just happened. The shuttle was to his back. In front of him, three people stood.

Techno had Tommy in a headlock—clearly not with the intention to hurt him, but tight enough to keep him from squirming out of his grip. That didn't mean Tommy wasn't trying though. He was cursing up a storm as he clawed at Techno's arms, his bag forgotten on the ground by his feet.

Then, besides the two of them, there was Phil.

Phil, who Wilbur now realized was the person he'd elbowed. Phil, whose wings were tucked tightly against his back, although his feathers were more ruffled than he'd ever seen them. Phil, whose mouth was set in a grim line, eyes completely unreadable.

Behind them, Wilbur could see Puffy holding Jack's arms behind his back. He wasn't fighting her though, having gone limp in her arms like a doll.

"Orpheus, you don't wanna do this," Techno warned, seemingly unphased by the way Tommy was still scratching at his arm. "Step away from the shuttle."

"No!" Wilbur shouted, saltwater burning every single organ in his body. "Let go of him!"

"You know we can't do that, mate," Phil said, his voice much lower than Techno's.

"Yes you fucking can! You let us stay here for refuge, but now we're leaving!" Wilbur shot back, fighting to take full breaths.

"Why though?" Techno asked, brows furrowing. "Why do you wanna leave all of a sudden?"

"Because you're a fucking liar!" Tommy shouted, still thrashing in Techno's grip.

Techno frowned, while Phil raised an eyebrow. "What's he talking about?" Phil asked, looking at Wilbur.

Wilbur gulped. "We know about Ranboo, and the 'assignment' Techno gave him," he spat out, glaring at the two men in front of him.

Immediately, Phil sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, while Techno's frown deepened.

"Look, I get—"

“We don’t want to hear it!” Wilbur shouted, cutting Techno off. “You’ve been lying to our faces this whole goddamn time. Telling us that you care. Acting like you actually give a shit about what we want. But it was all a fucking game to you, wasn’t it?” He winced, stumbling further back against the shuttle. “You both were manipulating us from the start.”

There was a heavy pause as Phil and Techno shared a look. It was only for a second, but something seized inside Wilbur’s chest seeing it, the waves battering him on all sides as he drowned over and over and over again.

“Just let us explain-”

“No!” Wilbur exclaimed, cutting Phil off this time. “Let go of Tommy, and let us leave the planet!”

“Where are you gonna go though?” Techno asked, a crease forming between his brows.

“Like I’d fucking tell you,” Wilbur shot back.

Phil sighed. “Orpheus, you don’t understand, if you leave the planet-”

“We’ll be in danger, I know,” Wilbur finished for him with a scowl. “But you wanna know something, Phil?” He sucked in another breath, wincing as the cold air burnt his throat. “I’d rather take my chances with fucking Essempi than stay here for one more second. Because at least Dream won’t make me false promises before putting a knife to my throat!”

A long moment passed as Phil stared at him, something in his expression crumbling away. He opened his mouth again, but at that second, all Wilbur could hear in his mind was one word.

*Liar liar liar-*

And just like that, the waves went silent again.

*”Let go of my brother!”*

The command ripped out of his throat with such violent force, it shook the walls of the hangar itself. He could practically see the words knock into Techno, his arms falling immediately as Tommy sprinted to Wilbur.

Before any of them could process what he’d just done, Wilbur then shouted,

*”Don’t move!”*

Phil paused midstep, while Techno’s hand froze where he had been reaching out to grab Tommy. Behind them, Wilbur saw Jack shrug off Puffy’s grip, practically falling on the console to continue the hangar opening process. Puffy stood completely still behind him.

Tommy stumbled over to him, and Wilbur wrapped an arm around his little brother, pulling him into his side as a fire made itself known in his throat.

“We’re going to leave,” Wilbur said, wincing at how hoarse his voice was after that. “Whether you like it or not.”

Although he didn’t want to, Wilbur found his eyes drawn to Phil. He wasn’t sure what he was going to see written across his face, but braced himself for anger—maybe even fear.

Instead, Phil was smiling.

It was a kind of smile Wilbur had never seen on Phil’s face before. There was no smugness to it. No mockery. This wasn’t him gloating about having the upper hand. No, this was something different.

*Pride* is what his smile screamed. Blinding pride.

“You can use your Voice,” Phil murmured, something almost giddy lilting his words. “This whole time, and you never gave that up.” He let out a small laugh, but it was awkward given the fact that he couldn’t move his head. “Well played, little bird. Well played.”

And despite everything, Wilbur couldn’t help but think that the praise sounded completely genuine.

He froze, staring at Phil as his throat threatened to close up on him. Tommy noticed this though and grabbed his hand, dragging him towards the shuttle.

“Wil, we gotta go. That won’t last forever.”

Wilbur could only nod, his head feeling as though it was full of cotton as Tommy opened the door to the shuttle, guiding him inside.

Right before the doors shut, Wilbur and Phil locked eyes again, and Wilbur felt a single tear fall down his cheek.

And then, they were inside the shuttle.

The process of climbing into the cockpit and starting up the shuttle was all a haze for Wilbur. Everything inside of him was cold as he went through the familiar startup procedures, the shuttle humming to life under his hands.

Slowly, he pushed the accelerator to drive the shuttle towards the exit in the ceiling. Through the windshield, he could see Phil, Techno, and Puffy still frozen, but this time he did his best not to look at Phil’s face as they drove past him.

His throat ached something fierce. His head was pounding. He used one hand to wipe the tear off his cheek.

At some point, Tommy had grabbed his hand again. With a quick squeeze of his fingers, Wilbur was yanked back down into his body, and squeezed back as hard as he could.

“Let’s go.”

They were both slammed back in their seats as the shuttle flew up the tunnel at breakneck speed. Wilbur glanced at the numbers on the console, wincing when he saw the outside temperature dropping rapidly.

Higher.

Higher.

*Higher.*

Light.

Wilbur was blinded by a sea of bright white snow as the shuttle left the tunnel behind. He pushed down harder on the accelerator, angling the ship so it was heading straight for the sky.

Breaking through the atmosphere was much easier this time without the presence of violent winds threatening to tear the ship apart. Even still, Tommy started screaming, and Wilbur did too as they were pressed so far into their seats, they couldn't even move their heads.

They climbed and climbed and climbed, and then-

Stars.

The shuttle broke the atmosphere, and they were swallowed by the stars. Wilbur gasped in relief and Tommy did the same, both slumping forward now that they were no longer flying at a ridiculous speed.

Through the window, Wilbur glanced down at the surface of Zephys IV. From above the planet, it seemed like nothing more than an endless wasteland of snow and ice. But it was so much more. More than anyone who hadn't been there could ever imagine.

Wilbur turned the ship away from the planet, and a small part of him screamed in protest, but he ignored it.

Although he didn't have a destination in mind yet, he just knew they had to get away from Zephys IV. Even just seeing it through the window of the shuttle was enough to make him white knuckle the controls, so he forced himself to press down on the accelerator towards the empty void of stars.

The cockpit of the shuttle was silent for several long minutes. Zephys IV got smaller and smaller behind them, as his and Tommy's breathing evened out. Wilbur tried not to let himself think about everything that had just happened. He tried not to think about Jack, or Aimsey, or Techno—and especially not Phil. But that smile was seared into his mind, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to get it out.

More time passed. Soon, they were out of Zephys IV's orbit, and found themselves floating aimlessly. A decision now had to be made.

“Do you know where we're gonna go?” Tommy asked, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts.

Furrowing his brows, Wilbur pulled up a map on the console screen, and tried to see what was nearby. It seemed like Quackity had refueled the shuttle, giving them far more options to choose from compared to what they had when they left Eldingvegr.

“Y’know, we might be able to swing a blaziphane deal with Mantle,” Wilbur murmured, noticing how Schlatt’s planet wasn’t terribly far away from where they were. “But they’re pretty reliant on Empire protection, so I don’t know-”

“Uh, Wil?”

Hearing the note of fear in Tommy’s voice, Wilbur snapped his head up, opening his mouth to ask what was wrong.

But then he saw it.

**SYSTEM OVERRIDE** the console screen blared. **ALL SYSTEMS FROZEN**

Then, without Wilbur touching anything, the shuttle began to turn. Wilbur grabbed the wheel, trying to turn it the other way, but it was impossible to move.

As the shuttle turned, a new ship came into view. Or rather, it wasn’t a new ship, but one that was familiar for all the wrong reasons.

White metal. An intricate crest carved in the front.

An Eldingvegr ship. Not a small escape shuttle like what they were in, but the Royal Ship he and Tommy had ridden in as children for diplomatic conferences.

Suddenly, a voice crackled through their radio.

“Shuttle Seven, this is Commander Sapnap, General of the Essempi Army. We have overridden your systems, and you are going to be brought into our hangar for immediate arrest. Do not resist, or force will be used. Do you understand?”

The shuttle was already driving towards the open hangar of the Royal Ship on its own. Even if they put on space suits and jumped out of the fucking airlock, they would be picked up immediately by the Royal Ship.

They’d been waiting. This whole fucking time, Essempi had just been lying in wait to see if Wilbur and Tommy left Zephyr IV.

A million emotions flooded through him at once. But before Wilbur could process any of it, he found himself leaning forward, and tapping the button to turn on the mic.

“General Sapnap, is it?”

The shuttle moved into the Royal Ship’s hangar, and Wilbur’s chest seized as the door shut behind them.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

There was a loud roaring sound as the hangar was repressurized, and Wilbur knew they only had seconds before soldiers flooded inside the shuttle.

“You’re a fucking cunt.”

Behind him, he felt Tommy’s arms wrap around him in a hug, as staticky laughter echoed out from the mic. Wilbur leaned back, squeezing his eyes shut as Tommy buried his face in his hair.

“Well, Prince Orpheus, just wait till you meet the Emperor.”

## Chapter End Notes

:) they're fucked

damn, WHAT a chapter. that scene with Wilbur using his Voice on Phil has been one I've had planned for over a year now so it felt so good to finally put into the fic. despite how bad the situation is, Phil is proud of Wilbur for finally one-upping him :)

I hope you guys enjoyed!! feel free to scream at me in the comments. we're going back to Eldingvegr, baby!

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees (especially tumblr bc I talk a lot of analysis there about this fic)

# on death row

## Chapter Summary

The boys are back on Eldingvegr.

## Chapter Notes

HELLO HELLO we have a new chapter out of this!!

we're nearing the end of this fic which is INSANE to me. I've been working on this fic for so long, I'm gonna be so sad when it's over. but alas, all good things must come to an end eventually, and I'm really excited for you guys to see what I have in store for the finale.

also a note: due to certain irl circumstances involving cc!dream that only came to light somewhat recently, I no longer wish to include him in my works. He's going to appear in the finale of this fic since I began this story in April of 2022 and want to finish out the story as I planned it, but also, I write characters and not cc's. So the representation of Dream you see here is based entirely off c!dream. Just wanted to note that for anyone concerned! And he won't appear in this chapter, he's only going to appear in chapter 28.

btw! check out the end notes of this chapter for a fun surprise :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This deja vu was not a welcome feeling.

When Sapnap had told Wilbur and Tommy that they were being brought back to Eldingvegr, he wasn't sure what to expect. Would they be brought straight to their executions? Would they be put in a prison cell? Would they be separated?

On the Royal Ship, they'd been gagged and placed in a holding cell. Neither of them were allowed to ask questions, and spent the entire ride to Eldingvegr huddled in a corner, holding onto each other for dear life. At least until a medical officer showed up and jabbed them both with a tranquilizer.

Wilbur woke up in a room that was all too familiar to him despite not having seen it in months. His bedroom had been stripped of everything that made it *his*—the art on his walls, the books on his desk, the clothes in his closet—but he knew where he was nonetheless. The 'W' he scratched into the bottom of his bed frame as a child proved it.

Strangely enough, Tommy was allowed to stay with him. Once Wilbur had opened his eyes, he rolled over to find Tommy passed out on the bed beside him. Both of their gags had been removed, but a silencing barrier shimmered in front of the door. Two guards stood just beyond it, and Wilbur was thrown back to when he and Tommy had found Niki in the exact same situation during their initial escape.

The *deja vu* of it all was practically choking him. Being back in his childhood bedroom, watching the silencing barrier hum with energy, looking out his window to see dusty pink skies when he'd grown so accustomed to seeing ice instead—they were right back in the heart of the invasion. Except this time, they didn't have the element of surprise on their side. They didn't have *anything* on their side. It was only a matter of time.

"D'you think Dream's setting up some fucked up torture device to kill us with? And that's why we're waiting here?" Tommy asked after they'd finished searching every inch of Wilbur's room for a possible escape route (to no avail).

Tommy's voice was hoarse, and his eyes were bright red from crying. He'd woken up in the midst of a panic attack, and Wilbur had been forced to push down his own terror to try and help his little brother.

Since the initial panic though, the terror... well, it hadn't subsided. It was still there, lingering under his skin like electricity while pushing nausea up his throat. But at the same time, it was as if it was muted. He could feel it, but he was too exhausted to get worked up about it again.

Wilbur was numb. That was the best way to describe it. He and Tommy were trapped on Eldingvegr, completely at the mercy of a man who had every reason in the world to execute them as soon as possible. They were going to die. There was no question about it. Now, it was just a matter of when.

"I don't know," Wilbur mumbled, forehead resting against his window. "Maybe he's trying to be theatrical about it. Building a giant guillotine or some shit so he can make it a public celebration."

Tommy's face twisted in disgust at that, the dried tears on his cheeks cracking at the movement. "Would people really watch that?"

Wilbur shrugged. "He might force them."

"That's fucked up," Tommy muttered, pulling his knees up to his chest.

Outside the window, Wilbur's eyes lingered on the sylfrwood trees. Some had blackened trunks, and he thought back to the way they shimmered when he watched them burn. Others were smaller than he remembered them being, and he wondered if Dream had the gardeners plant new ones to replace those that had been lost during the invasion.

Wilbur wondered if this was what Niki's view had been during her time in Essempi custody. How many days had she spent sitting on the floor of her room, staring at the burnt out husks of sylfrwood trees and wondering if Wilbur and Tommy would ever come back for her? How long had it taken her to decide to take matters into her own hands? Had she known she was



going to be put into Themisian custody? Or did she believe she was just waiting for her own execution, the same as Wilbur and Tommy were doing right now?

*"If you got to choose how you died, what would you pick?"*

*Wilbur wasn't sure where the question had come from. Maybe it was because when the wind was howling like the screams of the damned, he felt like death was never far behind. Maybe it was because he could still remember the way the metal screeched as his mother's ship was torn to pieces, and he always wondered how painful it had been for her. Maybe it was a question he'd always wanted to ask his mother—what she would've chosen if she'd gotten a say in the matter instead of what fate wrought.*

*Or maybe it was just a question that popped up in his head for no good reason. It's not like it mattered either way.*

*Niki—whose makeup had rubbed off under her eyes, and was swaying from side to side like she was going to fall asleep at any moment—frowned at the question.*

*"That's a bit dark, isn't it?" She asked, her words slurred with exhaustion.*

*"It's just a question," Wilbur shrugged, eyes focused on his bedroom ceiling.*

*Beside him, Niki let out a soft sigh, and forced herself to sit up straight. "I'm guessing I can't choose old and warm in my bed, surrounded by family?"*

*Wilbur shook his head. "No, it's anything that's not an old age kind of death."*

*Humming, Niki rubbed at her eyes, smearing her makeup even more. "I... I don't really know," she admitted, bringing her knees up to her chest and resting her head on top of them. "I obviously wouldn't want it to be painful, but I think what's most important to me is that I have a say in it."*

*At this, Wilbur furrowed his brows. "What?"*

*"If I have to die, I don't want it to be at the mercy of some other person or outside force. I want it to be under my terms," Niki explained quietly. "If I'm on a ship that crashes, I want to be the one piloting it. If I drown, I want to be the one that jumped in the water. If I'm murdered—"*

*"Murder?" Wilbur cut in, eyes going wide.*

*"I mean, anything's possible," Niki pointed out. "So if I'm murdered, I want to be the one who started the fight. Does that make sense?"*

*Clenching his jaw, Wilbur nodded. "Agency. You want agency in your death."*

*"Yeah. That's it." Her half-lidded gaze flickered back to Wilbur, curiosity sparking inside the silver. "What about you?"*

At the time, Wilbur didn't have an answer as well thought out as Niki's. The most he could come up with was that he didn't want it to hurt. But now, staring death right in the face, Wilbur thought he understood her answer a lot more than he had before.

It was so much easier to be at the mercy of the waves inside of him compared to being at the mercy of someone he'd never even looked in the eye. The seafoam was still fizzling, the saltwater was still burning his lungs, but he'd learned to accept it. The waves were just as much a part of him as his own two hands. It didn't mean he could control it. No, far from it. But it didn't hurt to breathe anymore, and he considered that a small victory in the face of the ultimate loss.

Even still, he didn't have what Niki said she wanted in her own death. Agency. It was entirely possible she was still alive, but it was equally as possible that she had died after escaping Eldingvegr. And if that was the case... well, he hoped she'd gotten her wish. That it had been under her terms and no one else's.

Tearing his eyes away from the window, Wilbur focused on Tommy again. He was sitting on top of Wilbur's bed, curled in so tightly on himself, it was like he thought that if he could make himself small enough, no one would see him.

Wilbur saw him. Wilbur saw the shaky, terrified mess that his little brother was, and got the urge to cry all over again. Because things weren't supposed to be this way. Tommy should've been stretched out across Wilbur's bed, complaining about how he didn't want to do the homework Foolish assigned him. Niki should've been sitting at Wilbur's desk, trying not to giggle as she and Wilbur shared exasperated looks across the room. Tubbo should've been leaning against the doorframe, reminding Tommy they only had a few minutes before his break was over and he needed to get back to his lessons.

But there was one thing Wilbur could be grateful for, and it was that he and Tommy were together.

Things weren't the same between them, but they were still together even at the end. No one could take that away from them. Not even Dream.

Even if Wilbur couldn't have agency in his own death, he could have control over one thing.

"Tommy," Wilbur began, his voice low. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

Tommy glanced down at Wilbur on the floor, brows furrowed in confusion. "Talk about what?"

"You know. Everything we were supposed to talk about before we found out about Ranboo," Wilbur explained, the ache making itself known in his chest once again.

At this, Tommy's eyes widened as understanding washed over him. "I... I don't really know if now is a good time, Wil."

The ache got worse.

“Tom, we’re not going to have any other time for it.”

The truth burnt his throat, but he forced it out anyway. Because they were long past the point of pretending. This was the end, and the guards could come take them at any time. If there was going to be a time to get it all out on the table, it was now or never.

Tommy understood this. Wilbur knew he did. Even still, he flinched at Wilbur’s words, as if he’d been slapped.

Wilbur was quiet as Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, taking a few breaths to steady himself in the face of their grim reality. After a few moments, he opened his eyes again, and Wilbur thought they had never looked like such a dull shade of blue.

“You’re right,” he whispered. “We should do it now.”

A few beats passed. Wilbur’s heart was pounding in his chest, but began to slow when Tommy reached out to squeeze Wilbur’s fingers between his own.

“I don’t really know where to start,” Wilbur murmured. “What do you wanna know?”

“A lot,” Tommy huffed, keeping his eyes on their joined hands. “But I guess one of the first things is just... when we got to Zephys IV, you changed. You got angrier, and stopped talking to me as much. Then you got paranoid and just- you were so *different*. What happened?”

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to figure out how to put that entire mess into words.

“It’s hard to explain,” he confessed. “I don’t fully know what happened myself. From the minute we landed on Zephys IV, I was scared shitless. I didn’t know if I’d made the right choice bringing us there or not. I kept thinking that with one wrong move, we’d end up getting killed again. Then the negotiations came into play, and as your advisor, I felt like I had to find a way to keep us from joining the Empire. But I didn’t have the slightest idea how the fuck to do that.”

“What do you mean you didn’t know?” Tommy asked, frowning now. “You kept telling me what to do or what to say like you had some giant plan I couldn’t know about.”

Wilbur let out a pained laugh and shook his head. “No, there was no plan. At least not a coherent one. I had a few different ideas but then something else would come along that would fuck them up, so I kept coming up with other angles. But if I’m being honest, I never knew what the fuck I was doing. I was just guessing and hoping for the best.”

“You certainly didn’t act like it,” Tommy huffed, turning Wilbur’s hand over in his own to mess with his fingers—a nervous habit he’d kept from when he was a little kid.

“I know,” Wilbur nodded. “I didn’t want you to worry, so I just acted like I knew what I was doing as best I could.”

Tommy glanced up at this, his frown deepening. “What do you mean you didn’t want me to worry?”

“I dunno, I just-” Wilbur bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to squirm under Tommy’s gaze. “I’m your older brother, and I’m your advisor. It’s my job to advise you on political decisions, and it’s also my job to take care of you. I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t capable of either of those things.”

“I’m fifteen though,” Tommy argued. “It’s not your job to take care of me.”

Wilbur had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. “Of course it is. It’s always been my job.”

“I’m not fucking helpless, Wilbur!” Tommy exclaimed, pulling his hand away now.

“You’re a child though, and I don’t mean that as an insult,” Wilbur pushed. “I know you think you can take care of yourself, but you can’t. Not when you’re only fifteen.”

Tommy was silent for a moment, his face screwed up into a troubled frown.

Then,

“Who’s taking care of you though?”

Wilbur’s breathing hitched, and he looked down at his lap to avoid Tommy’s eyes. “I’m-”

“You’re nineteen. That’s not that much older than me, dickhead,” Tommy snapped, and Wilbur felt a hand grab his chin, forcing his head up. “If you’re taking care of me, then I get to take care of you too.”

And while Wilbur had already been trying to adjust to the idea of letting Tommy help him when he needed it, it was still something that was easier said than done.

“I’m sorry I stopped trusting you,” Wilbur whispered as Tommy dropped the hand holding his chin. “I just- I got so wrapped up in my own head. I didn’t know what to do and things just spiraled out of control.”

Tommy’s eyes fell back down to his lap. “It’s okay. And I’m sorry for brushing off your paranoia so much when you ended up being right.”

Shaking his head, Wilbur put a hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I was acting like a dick, so I get why you didn’t wanna listen to me.”

Nodding, Tommy was silent for another moment, something clearly on his mind.

Wilbur waited.

And waited.

“Did you trust Phil?”

Just like that, all the air was knocked out of his lungs.

“What?”

“Phil. Did you trust him before we found out about Ranboo?” Tommy asked.

The strange thing was, the question wasn't an angry one. It wasn't suspicious either. His voice was soft, if a bit solemn. Wilbur couldn't even detect a hint of jealousy.

It was just a question. Not a test.

But it wasn't a question Wilbur had a clear answer to.

“I... I don't know,” he admitted, wincing when Phil's face flashed in his mind. “With certain things, yes, I did. But I think more than anything, I just-” he took a breath. “I *wanted* to trust him. So fucking badly. I wanted to believe everything he told me.”

His eyes were burning again, although no tears fell. Still, Tommy reached out to grab his hand again, and some of the tension leaked out of his shoulders at the touch.

“What did he tell you that you wanted to believe?” Tommy asked in that same solemn tone. “I mean, how did you two even get so close? I thought you hated him because of the ominous shit he would say to you, but then you just kept talking to him, and that was when you started acting really weird.”

“I wish I understood it,” Wilbur murmured, squeezing Tommy's hand. “We just... talked. He told me about his childhood and how Zephyrs IV came to be, and he- he understood me. I had so much shit going through my head all the time, and he knew exactly how to put it into words.” He paused, blinking fast as he looked up at the ceiling. “It happened without me even realizing it. I just found myself seeking him out more and more for advice, and he'd say these things to me that I didn't even realize I needed to hear.”

“What would he say to you?” Tommy pushed.

“He-” His voice cracked, and Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut again. “He'd tell me that I was worth something. That I had potential. That I could be more than just a bastard prince.”

“Wh- Of course you're fucking worth something, are you insane?” Tommy exclaimed, looking both confused and angry at the same time. “You know that. Don't be stupid.”

Clenching his jaw, Wilbur carefully avoided Tommy's eyes. “Tommy, I was raised to be your advisor. Nothing more.”

“I mean, you're supposed to be my advisor, yeah, but that doesn't mean you're not worth anything.” Tommy was only getting more confused as the seconds ticked on. “I- Wil, c'mon, that's fucking stupid. Why would you even think that?”

“I'm a bastard,” Wilbur pointed out, his voice thick. “You're the only reason I was allowed to stay on Eldingvegr. I have no ties to it otherwise.”

“You've lived here since you were, like, two years old or something. It's just as much your home as it is mine!” Tommy argued. “And why the fuck do you keep bringing up the bastard thing? Who cares about that?”

“Everyone cares!” Wilbur suddenly shouted, making Tommy jump back in surprise. “My entire life, I was never allowed to forget the fact that I was lucky to be here. No one, and I mean *no one* in this palace let me forget that.”

“Wil, I know the servants called you a bastard sometimes but-”

“Sometimes?” Wilbur cut Tommy off with a bitter laugh. “I was called an örlen, I was called a bastard, I was called a leech—no one wanted me here! You were the only person on the entire planet who wanted me here, so that’s why I stayed. And everyone around us made damn sure I knew it.”

At this, Tommy’s eyes widened as something akin to horror washed over his face. “Are- Are you saying that when I wasn’t around-”

“Everyone acted differently the minute you stepped in the room,” Wilbur explained, his eyes still burning. “It’s not your fault, but you saw a very different side of the palace then I did.”

Tommy considered this for a minute, brows furrowing as his eyes began to water.

“I called you a bastard,” he said quietly, staring at their joined hands.

Wilbur winced. “You did.”

“How bad was that?” Tommy continued, forcing himself to meet Wilbur’s eyes. “I was just calling you that because I knew it upset you, but I didn’t- I didn’t realize-”

“It’s okay, you didn’t know,” Wilbur tried to reassure him.

Tommy shook his head. “It’s not okay. Tell me how badly I fucked up with that.”

“I swear, I’m okay now. You don’t need to beat yourself up over this.”

“But I wanna know!” Tommy pushed, squeezing his hand. “Just- I can handle it, okay? On, like, a ranking of shitty things I’ve said to you, how bad was it?”

*The worst*, was Wilbur’s first thought. Because that was the truth. That was the worst thing Tommy had ever said to him, but he didn’t want to tell Tommy that because what purpose did it serve? He didn’t know any better, and Wilbur knew that now. It was fine.

But Tommy was demanding an answer. His grip on Wilbur’s hand was turning bruising, and one thing he and his brother shared was their stubbornness. Tommy wasn’t going to let go of this.

He decided to put it as simply as he could.

“I thought you calling me that was your way of disowning me,” Wilbur confessed, keeping his head down.

Tommy made a choked noise at this, and suddenly, his little brother was wrapping his arms around him in the tightest hug he’d ever felt.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy exclaimed, his voice muffled by Wilbur’s shirt. “I’m so fucking sorry I-I didn’t mean that. I swear I-”

“It’s okay, Tommy. I know,” Wilbur reassured him, pulling Tommy close to his chest.

“It’s not okay!” Tommy protested.

“I’m telling you it is,” Wilbur shot back. “You didn’t mean it like that. I get it.”

Tommy shook his head, and pulled back from the hug enough to frown at him. “You still got hurt.”

“I’m okay now though.”

Although Tommy didn’t seem to believe him, after a few moments of staring each other down, he sighed and looked away.

“I’m sorry, Wil,” he repeated, sounding far more serious than Wilbur was used to.

And even though Wilbur told himself he was fine, although he’d stopped being angry at Tommy for that when he first realized that wasn’t how his brother had meant it-

He felt something inside of himself crack at the apology.

“I forgive you,” Wilbur whispered.

Tommy pulled him into another hug, and Wilbur let himself curl into his little brother. Although he was too exhausted for violent sobbing like their last serious talk, a few tears still dripped down his cheeks, staining Tommy’s shirt as Tommy played with the ends of his hair again.

They stayed like this for a few minutes in silence. The ache in Wilbur’s chest slowly faded, his tears drying up as the fingers playing with his hair tugged and tugged in a way that was gentle enough to never hurt. It reminded Wilbur of when Tommy was a baby and tried to play with Wilbur’s hair. He was fascinated by how curly it was, not realizing he had the same curls right on top of his own head, and would twist them around his fingers—often hard enough to make him cry out in pain.

There was no pain this time. None at all.

Eventually, Wilbur pulled away, although Tommy stayed close to his side as they both settled back against the pillows.

“So Phil, uh, helped you out after our fight?” Tommy asked once they were comfortable again.

Wilbur nodded. “Yeah, he did. He took me to his office because I was kind of, uh, having a breakdown-” Tommy winced at this, “and I ended up just falling asleep in there. I woke up in an unfamiliar room, and Jack told me I’d been given a room in the personal wing of the palace.”

Tommy's eyes widened. "You didn't ask for that?"

"No, not at all," Wilbur shook his head. "You thought I did?"

"Techno just told me you'd be staying in there for the time being, so I figured you at least talked to Phil about it," Tommy explained.

"I mean... I could've asked him to move me back into the main wing of the palace," Wilbur admitted, twisting his fingers in front of him. "Part of the reason why I didn't was because I was afraid of running into you, so I figured that'd be less of a risk if I was in there."

Tommy considered this for a moment. Considered the fact that Wilbur said that was only part of the reason.

"But you also wanted to stay there," Tommy finished for him.

Wilbur forced himself to nod. "I did."

To his surprise, again, there was no anger at this. In fact, Tommy just looked... understanding. Far more understanding than Wilbur would've expected.

"Tommy," Wilbur said after a few moments, "can I ask you about Techno?"

Although Tommy tensed at the question, he nodded after a beat of hesitation.

"I told you how I got close to Phil. How did you get close to Techno?"

Blinking quickly, Tommy curled further back into the pillows, keeping his eyes on the bed. "Kinda similar to what you described with Phil. During our training sessions we'd just talk. I'd start ribbing on him, and he'd shoot right back, and we'd banter a bit while we sparred. But during the water breaks and stuff he just started asking me how I was doing, and I'd always tell him I was fine until one day I just... couldn't. We didn't even get into an argument that day or anything. You just weren't talking to me and I was so pissed at you for being pissed at me and-"

He cut himself off with a sharp breath, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before opening them again.

"It was just a lot. I didn't tell Techno what was going on really, I just said I wasn't doing well, and he helped," he admitted, his voice wobbling. "Told me to go nuts on a training dummy, but when I got right in front of it, I didn't even want to. I punched it a few times but then I just sat on the floor. Techno seemed a little confused, but then he asked since I didn't wanna train, if I wanted to help him with something. We left the palace on one of those trains and he showed me this small ice cave just *filled* with these weird berries that grew from the ceiling. He called them iceclouds or something, and showed me how to check their leaves for mold and shit. And it was just-" another breath. "It was really nice. He didn't push me to talk or anything, and... I dunno, something shifted between us after that."

A shudder ran down Tommy's back, and Wilbur wrapped an arm around his shoulders.



“That’s why I thought I could trust him,” Tommy explained. “He didn’t push. He’d ask how I was doing, but that was about it. If he saw I was upset, we’d just go do something like train or check on the iceclouds, which always helped me kinda get my thoughts in order.” He paused again, a smile flickering over his face for the briefest of moments. “He’s also really funny.”

Wilbur blinked, thinking back to all his awkward encounters with Techno in the library or the hallways. “That’s kind of difficult to believe.”

“I know, but it’s true,” Tommy insisted. “He’ll just say the funniest shit in the most deadpan voice ever. He always-” cutting himself off again, Tommy’s smile disappeared, something pained flashing over it instead. “He always knew how to make me laugh when I was upset.”

Unsure of what to say to that, Wilbur simply tightened the arm he had around his brother. Tommy leaned into his side, shoulders shaking as he buried his face in Wilbur’s shirt.

The pain in Tommy’s voice was so palpable, Wilbur felt it as if it were his own. Listening to Tommy talk about the time he spent with Techno hurt not only because of how badly the betrayal must’ve been for him, but also because now he understood *why* Tommy trusted him.

Tommy wasn’t stupid for trusting Techno. No, he wasn’t stupid at all, and Wilbur hated that he berated Tommy for it all that time ago.

“Wil?” Tommy suddenly asked, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Back in the hangar, when you used your Voice on Phil, Techno, and Puffy, Phil said something to you,” Tommy said, lifting his head only the tiniest bit so he could meet Wilbur’s eyes. “He called you ‘little bird’, right?”

*Shit.*

Keeping his eyes on the ceiling, Wilbur forced himself to nod. “Yeah he, um, calls me that sometimes.”

“Why?”

Wilbur took another breath to steady himself. “He never said why he called me that specifically, but he told me that it was a term of endearment on Elytra.” He paused, trying to slow down his racing heart. “Specifically one that parents would use for their children.”

Tommy was silent for a moment. Then, he rested his head back on Wilbur’s shoulder, and Wilbur turned to rest his chin on Tommy’s hair.

“Do you think it wasn’t all a lie?” Tommy asked in a voice barely above a whisper. “Do you think they actually cared about us?”

And there was only one thing Wilbur could say to that.

“I hope they didn’t,” he whispered, wrapping his arm around Tommy as tightly as he could.

If they had been wrong-

If Phil and Techno had actually cared-

If he and Tommy had left them behind only to get executed by Dream-

That hurt far worse than believing that it was a lie all along.



Wilbur wasn’t sure when it happened, but at some point he and Tommy fell asleep again.

He woke up several hours later to the sound of footsteps echoing down the hall. Bolting upright, Wilbur’s heart slammed against his ribs, wondering if this was it. If the guards were coming to take him and Tommy to their executions.

Before he could work himself into a full panic though, a familiar figure appeared in the doorway, and Wilbur was hit with both a wave of relief and dread-inducing nausea.

“Tommy,” Wilbur said, locking eyes with the person in the doorway. “Get up.”

“Wilbur ‘m tired,” Tommy groaned.

*”Tommy.”*

At his change in tone, Tommy’s eyes shot open. He jolted upright, and as soon as he noticed the person at their door, his mouth dropped open.

Tubbo stood behind the shimmering barrier, wide blue eyes reflecting a strange shade of pink from the light. His mix of brown and blonde hair was a bit longer than it had been before the invasion, and his uniform seemed to be in better condition than Wilbur ever remembered seeing it, but besides that, he was the same.

So painfully and utterly the same.

For a long moment, Tubbo and Tommy just stared at each other. Then, after nearly a minute of silence,

“You motherfu-”

“I can’t hear anything you’re saying to me,” Tubbo said, cutting Tommy off. “There’s a silencing barrier in place.”

Fuck. Yeah, the silencing barrier. With the shock of seeing Tubbo, both he and Tommy had forgotten about it.

Tommy scowled, opening his mouth again, before shutting it and holding up a middle finger. To Wilbur’s surprise, Tubbo only sighed at this, and glanced down at a metal tray he had in

his hands.

It was then Wilbur realized Tubbo must've been there to deliver them food. He climbed off the bed first, walking over to the door to sit down in front of the barrier. Tubbo glanced between him and Tommy for a moment, before sitting down as well.

Wilbur watched Tubbo tap a few buttons on the side of the barrier. Near the bottom, a small part of the shimmering barrier shifted from pink to white, indicating objects could be passed through it. Tubbo slid the tray through to their side, before tapping another button, turning the barrier back to pink.

The food on the tray wasn't much, to say the least. Two bread rolls with jam, and two eplis almost rolling off the metal. There was also a bottle of water for each of them, but that was it. Wilbur wasn't too bothered by this though. Being put on an executioner's block didn't exactly stir up an appetite.

Tommy got up from the bed, settling down next to Wilbur in front of the tray. Tubbo was still sitting on the other side, glancing between Wilbur and Tommy while wringing his hands in his lap.

For a moment, no one moved. Wilbur could barely even breathe with how much tension was filling the air.

Then, Tommy reached behind him, and Wilbur realized he must've grabbed his holo-pad off his desk. He tapped on the screen a few times, used his finger to write out a message on the digital notepad, before holding it up for Tubbo to see.

*YOU KNEW THE INVASION WAS GOING TO HAPPEN*

*FUCKING TRAITOR*

Tubbo flinched at the vitriol, eyes falling to his lap as he hunched his shoulders in on himself.

"Yeah, I knew," he admitted, his voice low. "But I didn't-"

Cutting himself off, Tubbo glanced at the guards posted on either side of the barrier. While Wilbur was fairly sure they both had silencing features on their helmets just in case the barrier went down, he could see in Tubbo's eyes that he was still wary of being overheard.

He reached into his own pocket, turning on another holo-pad and dimming the brightness as low as it would go. Then, he wrote out his own message and held it up for Wilbur and Tommy to see.

*I didn't know Dream was going to execute you!! I thought you would just be exiled!!!*

Tommy scoffed. *So you were fine with us being exiled off our own fucking planet ok tubbo*

"I wasn't okay with it!" Tubbo whispered, curling his hands into fists.

Another beat passed as Tommy stared at him. Then, he wrote a single word on the notepad, and underlined it three times.

WHY?

Tubbo glanced between his own holo-pad and Tommy's, biting the inside of his cheek. He looked over his shoulder at the guards standing behind him, before writing out a much longer message.

*I didn't have a choice. Eret made me. They said the invasion was gonna happen no matter what and if I gave you guys sleeping pills it'd be easier to get you off planet without either of you getting hurt. I only found out Dream wanted to kill you guys after you escaped.*

It matched up with the conversation he and Tommy had overheard between Tubbo and Eret while they were in the crawlspace. Even still, disgust crawled up Wilbur's throat at such a bold-faced admission.

Taking the holo-pad from Tommy, Wilbur wrote, *You could've warned us.*

"I was trying to do the best thing for everyone!" Tubbo argued. "The invasion was going to happen either way, right? And I was told you were just gonna be shipped off planet! So when Eret told me to drug you, I thought about it and agreed that you guys being knocked the fuck out while everything went down was a lot easier than you trying to escape somewhere else!"

Tommy ripped the holo-pad out of Wilbur's hands to write his response.

*WE WOULD'VE DIED IF WE TOOK THOSE PILLS*

Tubbo flinched.

"I know," he whispered. "I'm so glad you didn't."

Wilbur grabbed the holo-pad again.

*We're going to die now*

There was no surprise on Tubbo's face as he read Wilbur's words. They were well past the point of lies. Tubbo knew exactly what was going to happen to them this time.

Tubbo's hands shook as he wrote out another message.

*I'm sorry*

Even without saying it out loud, Wilbur could hear all the shades of Tubbo's apology. Guilt, grief, resignation—there was no chance of saving them now. Last time, they were able to slip away in the chaos of the invasion. But Essemipi's control had settled in now. There were no bars to squeeze between, no crawlspace for them to hide in.

There was a sniffle beside him, and Wilbur looked over to see Tommy's eyes brimming with tears. He'd dropped the holo-pad, and pushed the food tray out of the way to press his hand

against the shimmering barrier.

Immediately, Tubbo did the same, placing his hand right where Tommy's was.

"Please," Tommy begged, his voice cracking. "Help us."

Tubbo took a shaky breath, squeezing his eyes shut as he rested his forehead on the barrier beside his hand.

But before he could respond, there was another set of footsteps echoing down the hall.

Jumping back from the barrier like it had shocked him, Tubbo shook himself off, the sadness on his face being replaced by a mask of perfect neutrality. His jaw was still clenched, and his eyes were slightly red, but otherwise nothing seemed amiss as he stumbled to his feet to greet whoever was coming their way.

"Um, Your Highness, I was just bringing the princes their food like I was ordered," Tubbo stuttered, bowing his head at someone just out of view of the door.

"That's alright, Tubbo," a deep, familiar voice replied. "If you don't mind though, I'd like to have a word with them both."

Immediately, anger had flashed over Tommy's face again, and a similar rage simmered behind Wilbur's ribs. Because they both knew the voice of the original traitor when they heard it.

"Oh, uh, okay," Tubbo nodded, moving away from the door. He spared one last worried look at the two of them, before forcing himself to turn away. He disappeared down the hall, his footsteps fading out within seconds.

Then, Eret stepped into his place.

Like Tubbo, their hair had grown since the last time Wilbur had seen them. They were dressed in a bare-shouldered gown made of billowing blue chiffon, the neckline embroidered with delicate gold thread and several heavy jewels. Gold powder decorated their pure white eyes and sharp cheekbones, but the makeup wasn't enough to distract from the dark circles that announced their exhaustion to the world.

For a moment, all Wilbur could do was stare at them. At the person who had been the closest thing to a guardian he had growing up. To the power-hungry advisor who less than a year before, lied to Wilbur's face and told him that Essempi wasn't a threat.

Eret broke their eye contact first.

"Guards," they said, waving at the soldiers to get their attention. "Would you mind leaving us for a moment? I wish to speak to the prisoners alone."

*The prisoners.*

The soldiers both nodded, boots clinking heavily against the marble as they disappeared from view of the doorway.

Immediately, the poker face Eret was wearing disappeared. Something like grief twisted their expression as they walked over to the barrier, kneeling down in front of it with a soft sigh.

“They’re only at the end of the hall, so I can’t speak as freely as I’d like, but it’s better than nothing,” they murmured, glancing between both the brothers. “But it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

...that’s it?

After all these months, after *agonizing* over Eret’s betrayal and what could’ve caused it, all they had to say was that it had been a while?

“You fucking snake,” Wilbur snarled, enunciating his words as clearly as he could so Eret could read his lips.

Eret winced at the insult. “I understand you’re upset at me-”

“Fuck you!” Tommy suddenly shouted, slamming his fist against the barrier and making it flicker. “You’re a fucking traitor! You’re a traitor to the Crown, to my father, to our mother-”

“I understand you’re upset, but I can’t hear anything you’re saying to me,” Eret finished, furrowing their brows at Tommy’s shouting.

Gritting his teeth, Wilbur grabbed the holo-pad again, and started to write out a lengthy message detailing how much of a prick Eret was. After a moment though, he stared at it, and crossed it out to write a single word instead.

*CUNT*

Eret sighed at the message. “I suppose I deserve that.”

Erasing the message, Wilbur wrote out a longer one this time.

*What the fuck are you here for, you conniving snake? To gloat? To mock us over the fact that you won?*

“No, I-” Eret’s breathing hitched, and they dragged a hand through their hair. “I swear to you, on my life, I wasn’t aware that Dream was planning to execute you.”

*But you still were going to exile us from our own planet,* Wilbur wrote, his hands shaking with rage. *You were overthrowing a monarchy that’s stood for centuries just to hold onto your crown.*

Blinking, Eret nodded. “I won’t try to dismiss it. I didn’t want to lose my power, so when Dream presented me with an opportunity to hold onto the throne, I couldn’t find it in myself to say no. But if I had known that Dream meant you both harm, I never would have agreed.”

Tommy took the holo-pad to write out his own response.

*If that's supposed to make us feel better you're doing a shit job*

Taking the holo-pad back from Tommy, Wilbur wrote out another reply before Eret could continue.

*Again, why the fuck are you here?*

"I... I have a question for you both," Eret said, something grim cast over their face. "Why did you come back?"

That-

That wasn't what Wilbur had been expecting.

He blinked once, wondering if he heard Eret right. Beside him, Tommy frowned, clearly just as confused as he was.

After a few moments of silence, Wilbur grabbed the holo-pad and wrote out a response.

*We've been in negotiations with the Antarctic Empire since we escaped.*

"I know that," Eret told him softly. "Dream already suspected it, but Princess Myrina confirmed it for us several months ago. I thought you were going to come back here with the full force of the Antarctic Empire's army in tow. That's why I'm so confused that you're here. I don't understand why you left on your own."

Fuck. Of course Hannah told Dream they were under the Antarctic Empire's protection. There was no reason for her not to tell him.

That must've been how Sapnap caught them so quickly. Essempi probably had surveillance on Zephys IV to see if they were going to make any moves towards Eldingvegr, but got Wilbur and Tommy flying out on their own instead.

They'd flown right into Essempi's hands.

*Our negotiations weren't going as expected,* Wilbur explained, holding the note up for Eret to see.

"Wilbur," Eret whispered, their face falling even more. "I was so relieved when I found out you were on Zephys IV, because that was the safest place in the whole galaxy for you to be. Dream might be arrogant, but he's no fool. He wasn't going to hunt you down when you were under the protection of Emperor Philza. But then you-" their voice cracked, "but then you *left*. And I can't protect either of you here."

Frowning, Wilbur moved to write out another message, but Eret kept talking before he could.

"I've tried everything I can," they explained in a rushed whisper. "Dream was going to have Sapnap execute you both on the Royal Ship, but I convinced him that he needs to follow

intergalactic law and hold a trial for you since he can't use the excuse that you were killed in the invasion. It's a sham trial that's already happening—neither of you will even appear in court—but he's going to claim that you two had plans to assassinate him. Once he finds you guilty, you'll both be put to death. It's just a damn paperwork trail he needs to have ready, but all it does is buy you time."

Wilbur had heard of sham trials like that before. Intergalactic law didn't particularly care about how real the charges were, or if a fair trial had actually been held. There just needed to be a paperwork trail, like Eret had said.

*We can't escape on our own. We've looked. Wilbur wrote on the holo-pad. If you want to help us, turn off the silencing barrier!*

Sighing, Eret shook their head. "I can't. Both the silencing feature and the barrier itself is password protected, with only Dream and Sapnap knowing what that password is. Even the guards stationed at your door don't know what it is, so they can act as a failsafe in case anything malfunctions and you can use your Voices on them. Even under your command, they wouldn't be able to let you out."

Of course they would lock the silencing feature after their failed attempt at rescuing Niki.

Disappointment settled itself over Wilbur's shoulders, weighing him down and choking him from the inside out. Although he hadn't gotten his hopes up, for the briefest of moments, he thought that Eret might actually be able to help them.

Their fate was sealed though. There was no getting out of this.

Wilbur wrote another note.

*Our blood is on your hands.*

Taking an unsteady breath, Eret wrapped their arms over their chest, and leaned back to push to their feet.

"I am so sorry."

With that, they waved for the guards to come back to their positions. Then they turned away from the door, and didn't spare a single glance back at them.

Silence hung over the room as Wilbur stared at the bread and fruit sitting on the tray in front of him. His head was throbbing, and the ache in his chest had turned into a black hole. Maybe his anger should've lingered. Maybe he should've been fighting off tears. Maybe he should've been trying to make his peace with his impending death.

Instead though, all Wilbur could think of was one thing.

They'd made the wrong choice by leaving Zephys IV.



## Chapter End Notes

emotional conversations! woohoo! ouch!

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! it's definitely the calm before the storm, because chapter 29 is intended to be the epilogue, so chapter 28 is really going to be our 'finale'. My mom is out of town right now which gives me a lot of free time, so I'm going to try and write chapter 28 before she gets back, so hopefully it'll be up soon! We'll have to wait and see though.

NOW FOR THE SURPRISE

**I'VE STARTED MY NEXT LONG FIC!**

yes you heard that right. since we're almost at the end of stars, it's time for me to post the first chapter of my next big project after stars is complete. the fic is called [through a glass divine](#) and it's a cyberpunk fantasy fusion au with some really fun worldbuilding that I think you guys will really like! the fic is wilbur-centric with a very heavy focus on crimeboys, so I really hope you all check it out! it's technically a rewrite of an older fic of mine that I didn't have the time to give a full story like it deserved, so now it's going to get a huge story like stars! if you like stars, I think you'll really like this one, so please go read the first chapter and subscribe to the story! It'll start updating regularly once stars is complete :)

let me know what you thought about this chapter down in the comments! we're so close to the end it's insane!!

don't forget I have a discord server! if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other cool peeps, check it out here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here!](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

# waves falling off the edge of the world

## Chapter Summary

Their time has run out.

## Chapter Notes

god. fuck. it's here. I didn't plan to write this chapter so fast but then I started hyperfocusing and next thing I knew I wrote 10k words in a single day.

word of note! chapter 29 is going to be an epilogue, so this is it! this is the finale chapter!

I really can't believe it's here. this story has been such a journey to write, and I'm so insanely proud of how it's turned out. this chapter especially is one I've wanted to write since I first came up with it in november of 2021, so it's insane to me that I actually did it. I got to it.

I won't waste your time, I know you wanna get into the story! Just know that Dream *is* in this chapter. Just a warning, he features very heavily in it, but again I'm basing my characterization off of c!Dream so there you go.

ok that's all for now! I really, really hope you enjoy this.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*It was a bad morning.*

*To be fair, all mornings since his fight with Tommy had been bad mornings. But from the moment he woke up, the memories of explosions ringing in his ears, Wilbur knew it was going to be worse than usual. A thick fog had settled over his thoughts, and refused to let up even when he stumbled to the bathroom to splash water on his face.*

*He didn't feel like he was attached to his own body. Instead, he was some blurred, hazy thing floating above himself. A living ghost.*

*When he left his room to go to breakfast, he didn't speak to Jack. Thankfully, the moment he saw Wilbur's face, Jack seemed to know that he wasn't in the mood for conversation. Instead, he just led Wilbur to the dining room, throwing a worried glance back at him every few moments to make sure he was following along.*

*The moment he stepped foot in the dining room, Wilbur cursed himself for not just taking breakfast in his bedroom. He was so out of it, he'd just gone through the routine without thinking. He forgot that he could just call for his food to be brought to him.*

*The fog was far too thick for Wilbur to even hope to hold a conversation with Phil. But he was already there, and Phil was giving him a barely-there smile, encouraging him to come sit.*

*Wilbur didn't feel like he was the one controlling his limbs as he walked over to the table. Like someone else had taken over his body, and he was just along for the ride.*

*Once he sat down, Phil said something to him, but his voice was muffled by the water rushing in Wilbur's ears. He stared at his plate of food, wondering why it didn't smell like anything to him.*

*"Orpheus."*

*Phil's voice finally broke through, but it was still distant. Wilbur looked up from the plate, his eyes meeting icy blue ones filled with... well, it could've been concern, but it might've been closer to confusion. Wilbur couldn't tell, and didn't have the mental energy to try and discern it further than that.*

*Either way, Phil was looking at him very intently, and Wilbur took a breath, trying to break through the fog and listen to what he was saying.*

*"I'm sorry, what did you say?" He asked, feeling like a stranger's voice came out of his mouth.*

*Phil blinked. "I... I've been speaking for the past several minutes and- did you not hear any of that?"*

*The question wasn't accusatory. No, there was no anger in Phil's voice. Even in Wilbur's disconnected state he could tell that much.*

*If he had been less out of it, maybe he would've thought to lie. Maybe he would've realized how insulting it looked to admit to ignoring everything Phil had said to him since he sat down. Maybe he would've at least been embarrassed.*

*But he didn't think of any of that. It was difficult enough to come up with even a simple answer.*

*"No," he admitted. "I'm a bit tired."*

*It wasn't him being tired. Wilbur knew that. But he couldn't figure out how to put this haze into words. Especially not when the haze made words even more difficult for him than usual.*

*Phil was silent for a moment. His brows furrowed, before something much softer settled over his face. Something Wilbur would later realize was understanding.*

*“Tired. Right,” Phil murmured, nodding to himself. “If you’d like to go back to your room and rest some more you can. I’ll have someone bring breakfast to you later.”*

*Although Wilbur had cursed himself for not doing that earlier, now that he was sitting at the table with Phil, he couldn't bring himself to leave. Because if he went to his room, he'd lose himself in the fog. And being lost wasn't restful. Not in the slightest.*

*He didn't want to drift. He wanted to root himself back in his own body, and force his mind to wake up properly.*

*Wilbur needed to anchor himself back in reality. The silverware he was holding was cool against his fingers, which certainly helped, but it was small. He needed a heavier anchor.*

*He glanced down at the table again. Phil's hand was resting halfway between them. Likely by accident, but it was noticeable nonetheless. His razor sharp talons glinted in the light of the dining room, and Wilbur found himself reaching out without even thinking about it.*

*Phil stiffened when Wilbur took his hand, but didn't pull away. The hand was warm and solid in his own. He curled his fingers around Phil's, the tips of Phil's talons just barely poking into the palm of his hand.*

*It helped. Wilbur focused on the hand, squeezing his eyes shut and pressing Phil's knuckles to his forehead. His body was still on autopilot, but he was able to register more of what was going on around him. The cool air of the dining room, the weight of his coat draped over his shoulders, the warm hand against his forehead—it was all slowly coming back to him.*

*In retrospect, Wilbur wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, but he knew it was a while.*

*And yet, Phil never pulled away. Not once. He just let Wilbur hold on for as long as he needed to.*

Wilbur woke up to a gag being tied around his mouth.

Before he even had a chance to register what was going on, Wilbur thrashed against the hands grabbing him out of pure instinct. He let out a muffled scream, balking as his hands flew up to the fabric on his face, trying to pull it out.

Gloved hands grabbed his wrists, while another pair of hands twisted their fingers into his hair. Pain radiated through his scalp as his head was yanked backwards, an involuntary whimper bubbling up his throat as the gag was tightened and secured.

Blinking fast, Wilbur's sleep-addled mind struggled to catch up with what was in front of him. Essempi soldiers surrounded his bed, dark helmets obscuring their faces as they dragged him to his feet. He stumbled, head twisting around to see his little brother suffering the same treatment as him.

Tommy's eyes were wide as he thrashed against the hold the soldiers had him in. Although he was gagged, he kept trying to shout through it, but only succeeded in making muffled, angry noises.

As they were pulled out of the bedroom and down the hall, Wilbur felt the waves start back up. He wasn't gasping for air. He wasn't trying to fight against them. No, he breathed the saltwater in wholeheartedly, letting it burn his throat and his lungs as the roar got louder in his ears.

Terror and anger mixing into one. The waves swelling larger and larger as pressure built in the back of his throat—a command begging to be let out. Ice trickling through his veins, making his legs go stiff as panic filled his every cell.

This had to be it. The purgatory they'd been trapped in was finally at its end.

Wilbur was being walked a bit ahead of Tommy, but he kept twisting his neck to try and look back at his brother. Each time, the soldier holding onto him smacked the side of his head, but he ignored the pain echoing through his skull. He couldn't let Tommy out of his sight. While he didn't think the soldiers would separate them, he didn't know that for sure, and he wasn't going to let these be the last moments he had with his brother.

Eventually, the soldier holding him must've gotten tired of smacking him in the head, because they slowed down their pace so he and Tommy could walk side by side. As soon as their shoulders brushed, the tiniest bit of ice in Wilbur's veins thawed out. Tommy was right here. Wherever they were being taken, they were going there together.

The halls of the palace were seemingly unchanged by their absence. Towering pillars of marble glimmered in the reflection of the pink sky outside. Their footsteps echoed off the high ceilings, creating a discordant symphony that could almost be considered a funeral song.

What would their funerals be like? Did Essempi even allow funerals for those that had been executed? Or would he and Tommy's bodies be thrown into a nameless grave, destined to rot with only the sylfrwood trees and the twilight sky around to mourn them?

Maybe Tommy would be given a funeral. A memorial for the King That Never Was. The citizens of Eldingvegr would grieve Tommy's loss like they'd lost a member of their own family. He was adored by both those that knew him and those who did not. It was often said that Prince Theseus was a true child of Eldingvegr itself—with golden hair reminiscent of the sands of Sólsid, and eyes like ice to reflect the frigid landscape of Nóttid. With the loss of the King and Queen, the planet had made him its child, and it would no doubt mourn his death for a long time to come.

If Wilbur was lucky, he might get mentioned when others spoke about Tommy's death. The tragedy of the heir and his brother. Maybe historians would treat him kinder than he'd been treated in life. Another unfortunate casualty in Essempi's brutal takeover.

*Prince Theseus Thomas Ióni was executed alongside his half-brother, Orpheus Wilbur Sóti, who would have become Theseus' advisor had he ascended the throne. Although a bastard, Orpheus served his half-brother faithfully till the end, a sign of his loyalty to his adoptive planet.*

...what would Phil say when he found out about their deaths? He would be upset, there was no doubt about that. But would it be that he was so close to winning their negotiations, only

for them to run off and get themselves killed? Would it be because Dream won?

No. That wouldn't be the only reason Phil was upset, and Wilbur knew that. It was just a question of how deeply he'd mourn Wilbur's death.

They continued down the halls, stumbling over their own feet as the guards hurried them along. When they passed by the orrery, Wilbur's chest ached, remembering the conversation he'd had with Eret in there the day before the invasion.

*"I also like to think my duty has always included ensuring both you and Tommy are safe and whole as well."*

What a fucking snake.

By the time they reached the doors to the throne room, Wilbur was struggling to breathe in a way that had nothing to do with his gag. His heart slammed against his ribs, begging for release. His legs were shaking so much, he would've fallen over if he wasn't being held up by a soldier. When his shoulder brushed against Tommy's again, it brought no sense of relief. It only worsened the fear, knowing that Tommy very well might have to watch him die before he was executed himself.

Towering white doors, carved with intricate designs of constellations and spirals, opened on their own as soon as they approached. Wilbur's bare feet slid against the marble floor, his coat brushing the backs of his calves as he and Tommy were yanked to the front.

The throne of Eldingvegr was a marvel of metal craftsmanship. Much like the orrery, it was made of a mix of gold and silver—all swirling lines and beautiful carvings depicting the history of its rise to power. The discovery of blaziphane, the subsequent battles, followed by the people being united under one seat of power that was granted the right to rule by the stars themselves. The throne was a history book in itself, and Wilbur wondered if Dream was going to destroy it, or let Eldingvegr hold onto it under his rule.

Currently, the throne was empty. But the stairs leading up to it were not.

"We brought the prisoners as requested," one of the soldiers said, tightening her grip on the back of Wilbur's neck.

Although Wilbur had never actually laid eyes on Dream before, he immediately knew the man sitting on the steps to the throne was him.

He wore a similar uniform to that of his guards, albeit one that was far more ornate. Shimmering black fabric with hints of acidic green splashed throughout, with broad shoulder pads and silver medallions pinned to his coat like badges of honor. He wore black boots that went up to his knee, and a cloak in that same painful shade of green was looped around his belt—no doubt the color of his Empire.

Wilbur's eyes drifted up to his face. Although he'd heard Eret point out how young Dream was during the conversation between them he overheard, it was still surprising to see how youthful the man was for himself. The only thing marring his face was a jagged scar that ran

diagonal over his nose and across his cheek—a puckered, pink thing that had to be years old, but still looked painful.

For a brief moment, their eyes locked. Wilbur’s panicked gasps fell silent, and the waves drowned out any coherent thoughts he could’ve had in favor of one overwhelming emotion.

*Hate.*

Dream smirked when he saw the rage dancing in Wilbur’s eyes. Wilbur strained against the hold the soldier had on him.

“You’re certain their gags are secured?” Dream asked, finally looking away from Wilbur.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the soldier holding onto Tommy answered. “We tied them as tightly as possible.”

Yeah, no kidding. The gag was already making Wilbur’s jaw ache, and it had only been on him for a few minutes.

“Good. Tie them to the chairs,” Dream ordered, pointing to two wooden chairs that had been set back to back in front of the steps to the throne.

The soldiers nodded, and their shoulders knocked into each other again as they were guided towards the chairs. Wilbur caught Tommy’s eye and tried to give him the most reassuring look he could muster, but he knew it was a futile attempt. They were both scared out of their minds, and it showed.

Their hands were bound behind the backs of the chairs, while their ankles were tied to the legs. A rock dropped into Wilbur’s stomach the minute he realized he couldn’t see Tommy’s face like this. That they might not even be granted the kindness of witnessing the other’s death.

However, when Wilbur moved his hand, he felt his fingers brush against another. They were barely able to reach, but Wilbur hooked his pinky through Tommy’s, and felt Tommy pull toward it as much as he could.

The tiniest comfort imaginable, but one Wilbur was grateful for nonetheless.

“They’re secure,” Wilbur’s soldier reported, straightening up after tying his ankles.

Dream nodded. “Now go take your stations outside the doors.”

Saluting in unison, the soldiers turned and headed out of the throne room, the doors slamming shut behind them.

Dread wrapped itself around Wilbur’s throat as soon as they were gone.

“Well,” Dream began, clapping his hands together and making Wilbur flinch. “This has been a long time coming, wouldn’t you say?” He asked, glancing between Wilbur and Tommy.

Both of them were silent, and Wilbur did his best not to meet Dream's eyes again. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of witnessing his fear.

Because he wasn't looking at Dream though, Wilbur noticed movement out of the corner of his eye, and his heart sank even lower into his chest when he realized Sapnap was in the room as well.

"Dream, you know we have to wait until—"

"Oh chill out, I know we have to wait for Eret," Dream said, cutting Sapnap off as the General made his way up the steps to stand beside his Emperor. "Where the fuck are they anyway?"

Sapnap—who was much shorter than Dream, and dressed in full armor with a sword on his hip—shrugged. "I don't know. They were informed of the scheduled time, so they must be caught up in something."

Dream rolled his eyes. "Probably still getting dressed in one of those ridiculous outfits of theirs," he huffed. "I hope they know that we won't wait for them forever. I want to get this done sooner rather than later."

"As the reigning monarch of the planet, they have to be here to sign the death warrants," Sapnap explained, raising an eyebrow at Dream.

"We can always have them sign after and just say one of them tried to escape," Dream said, eyes flickering back to the brothers. He glanced between Wilbur and Tommy, a slow smile spreading over his face as his gaze settled on the still struggling Tommy. "The little one seems like the type."

Tommy immediately stopped trying to wriggle out of the restraints, and Wilbur could perfectly picture the glare he was giving Dream right then.

"We'll wait a bit longer," Dream continued after a beat. "After all, it's not like these two are going anywhere."

The ache in Wilbur's jaw grew worse as he clenched his teeth, wanting nothing more than to curse Dream out with every insult in his repertoire.

Clapping his hands again, Dream then moved off the steps and towards their chairs. "I suppose since we have time, we might as well have a bit of a chat. Since we haven't really talked face to face before." He circled the brothers like a predator assessing its prey. Wilbur refused to shrink under his gaze, meeting his eyes with all the rage he could muster.

Dream smirked again.

"In case no one explained it to you, you've been found guilty of conspiring to assassinate me," Dream began, his steps echoing off the cavernous walls. "It was a half-baked plot that involved you two sneaking back onto the planet and using your Voices to take out soldiers on



the way, but it was a doomed mission from the start. A fool's errand devised by two children thrown into a game they're not prepared for. Something only *idiots* would do."

Behind him, Wilbur felt Tommy tense.

"I'll admit, when I received the call from Sapnap telling me he'd captured you two on your own, I almost thought it was a trap. That the Antarctic Empire had sent you out of the atmosphere as bait, and Sapnap's ship was about to be raided by Antarctic soldiers." He paused, laughing to himself and shaking his head. "It just didn't make sense! If you had gone to any other planet, I would've hunted you down and killed you, destroying anyone that stood in my way. But I have to give you both credit, because you went to the one place I couldn't follow."

Even if they'd sought refuge on another planet, Dream would've followed them. If Wilbur had given into Tommy's protests when they first escaped and tried to hide out on an Outer Sector planet, they probably would've been dead in weeks.

Eret was right. Zephys IV was the safest place for them.

"I'm not the kind of man that admits to weakness, but I can't lie. When Princess Myrina told me that you two were in the midst of negotiations with Emperor Philza, I was worried. While I don't doubt the strength of my military—" Sapnap flashed a self-satisfied smirk at this, "the Antarctic Empire has us outnumbered. Fending off an invasion from them would be costly, if not impossible. So I kept my eyes on the planet constantly, because if they launched military ships at any point, we would need all the time we could get to prepare for war."

"Instead of an invasion though, we got you two," Sapnap chimed in, folding his arms over his chest.

"Again, I thought it was a trap because it seemed too good to be true. You two leaving Zephys IV completely alone, in the same exact shuttle you stole to get there? It was pathetic! Pathetic and so fucking easy!" Dream exclaimed, his smile having turned manic. "But it wasn't a trap! You're just idiots!"

The anger was simmering behind his ribs, waves crashing over and over again in his gut. Everything tasted like saltwater now, and Wilbur wasn't sure if he wanted to cry or scream.

The pinky he had wrapped around Tommy's was trembling now. With anger or fear, he wasn't sure. Still, he didn't let go, and neither did Tommy.

"Why did you do it? Why'd you leave?" Dream asked, raising an eyebrow at Wilbur. "Did you two not get along with Philza and Technoblade? Were they too *mean* to you?" His voice turned high-pitched and mocking, and Wilbur strained against his ties.

A beat passed, like Dream was waiting for a response. Then, he laughed again.

"Oh, right, you can't answer me," he taunted, circling their chairs again. "When I was planning the invasion, Eret warned me that you could use your Voice, Orpheus. And I gotta

admit, that's pretty impressive." Dream stopped in front of Wilbur's chair, leaning down so they were face to face.

It wasn't just Wilbur's hands that were trembling now. No, it was his entire body, and he knew this time that it was with pure, unfettered rage.

Dream was so close. If the gag wasn't in his mouth, he'd take a page out of Tommy's book and try to bite the piece of shit.

"I mean, everyone knows the Themisians don't teach men how to use the siren Voice. But you two aren't even full siren! You're only half! I didn't even know it was possible for half-sirens to use their Voices until Eret told me. So I knew I had to take measures for that right off the bat." He straightened up again, moving around to Tommy's side. "But then to find out that Theseus can use his Voice as well? When everything I'd heard about him told me he was just a spoiled, bratty child?" He laughed again, and Wilbur felt more than saw Tommy's flinch. "That was more than unexpected. Because you kept that even from Eret. So I'll give you credit where credit's due. That created far more problems for us than we were expecting."

Suddenly, there was the sound of the doors opening once again. Fear jolted through Wilbur like he'd stabbed, but when he turned his head, he was both relieved and upset by who he saw walking in.

"I- I was told to deliver these for the executions," Tubbo stammered where he was standing by the door, a metal tray shaking violently in his hands.

The tray itself had several items on top of it. A dark cloth bag, a vial of blaziphanes, and a curved dagger whose blade glittered with every shade of the rainbow—as if it was made entirely of prisms.

Somehow, Wilbur's heart dropped even further than it already had. Because even though he'd never been witness to a traditional execution before, he knew those were all the items required for it.

The fact that Tubbo had been the one ordered to deliver the tray was a level of cruelty Wilbur could barely even comprehend. It was so obvious that Tubbo was one slight breeze away from falling apart. All the color had drained out of his face, and his knuckles were white from gripping the tray as tightly as he was. He didn't look in his or Tommy's directions as he made his way over to Dream and Sapnap, and Wilbur couldn't blame him. Even still, his chest ached when he felt Tommy shudder behind him, and wondered if his brother was fighting back tears.

"Oh, right, the execution rites Eret mentioned," Dream muttered, gesturing for Sapnap to take the tray from Tubbo. "I have no fucking clue what to do with these things, so if Eret doesn't show up soon—"

Before Dream could finish his sentence, there was the sound of clattering as the tray dropped to the floor. Then Tubbo let out a strangled scream, launching himself at Dream with his hand curled around the glimmering dagger.

It all happened so fast. One moment, Tubbo was trying to stab Dream.

The next, Tubbo shouted as he was shoved back, the dagger clattering to the floor by his feet.

“Well well well, what do we have here?” Dream mocked, fingers twisted into the front of Tubbo’s shirt. “Was that an assassination attempt?”

Holy shit. Tubbo had attacked Dream. Tubbo had attacked Dream in front of his own general to try and help Wilbur and Tommy.

Wilbur’s throat threatened to close up on him. Because Tubbo still cared. He never stopped caring, and it was so obvious he desperately wanted to fix what he’d done. But now he was in just as much danger as they were.

Tubbo clawed at the hand Dream was using to hold onto him, making strange choking noises as Dream lifted him onto his tip toes.

“Do we have to have a trial for this one, or can we just kill him?” Dream asked Sapnap, making Tommy jolt.

“Fuck you!” Tubbo forced out between gritted teeth. At the same time, Tommy screamed through his gag.

Before Dream could respond, the door to the throne room opened again, and another unexpected face ran into the room.

“Uh, Your Majesty I was told to- wait, Tubbo?!”

Like Eret and Tubbo, Foolish didn’t seem very different from the last time Wilbur had seen him. His gold-streaked hair was cut shorter than before, and he held dark circles under his eyes the same as Eret, but otherwise didn’t look any worse for wear.

“You know this boy?” Sapnap asked, resting a hand on the hilt of his sword.

Foolish nodded, eyes blown wide as he glanced between Tubbo struggling in Dream’s grip, and Wilbur and Tommy tied to their chairs. “Uh, yeah, he’s Eret’s personal servant.”

Dream huffed. “Well, Eret’s personal servant just tried to stab me.”

Immediately, Foolish’s eyes fell to the dagger by Tubbo’s feet.

“Look, you gotta understand, he’s just a kid,” Foolish quickly said, walking over to where Tubbo was still clawing at Dream’s hand.

“He tried to assassinate the Emperor,” Sapnap pointed out, his voice tight.

“I know but- but c’mon, man. He’s fifteen,” Foolish argued, hands hovering like he wanted to grab Tubbo by the shoulders and yank him away from Dream. “Plus, like I said, he’s Eret’s personal servant. Any punishment should be cleared with them first.”

Tubbo had stopped fighting now, instead going limp in Dream's grip as he struggled to stay on his tip toes.

"We can't just-"

"Sapnap," Dream said, cutting his general off, "we can deal with the servant later. I'd rather focus on the princes."

A beat passed between the three men. The tension in the air was so thick, Wilbur could practically see it coiling around Foolish, Dream, and Sapnap.

Then, Sapnap nodded and dropped the hand on his sword. At the same time, Dream let go of Tubbo, and his legs gave out immediately. The only reason he didn't collapse to the ground was because Foolish grabbed him before he could.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Foolish reassured, hoisting Tubbo over his shoulder like he was a sack of flour.

"No, you can't- Foolish! Stop them!" Tubbo shouted, slamming his fists into Foolish's back. "They're gonna kill Wilbur and Tommy!"

Foolish flinched at this, but kept his eyes on Dream and Sapnap to avoid looking at either him or Tommy.

"I also-"

"Fuck you!"

"I also have a message from Eret," Foolish continued, ignoring Tubbo's protests. "They apologize for running late, but they're unexpectedly delayed. They're requesting you wait until they can arrive though before going through with the execution."

...unexpectedly delayed?

Wilbur didn't hope. He didn't dare let himself hope. But a small part of him in the very back of his mind began to wonder if it was possible. If there was more going on to Eret's absence than what met the eye.

"What's taking them so long?!" Dream demanded, throwing his arms out in exasperation. "Like, how hard is it to walk across the goddamn palace for an execution?"

"I don't know the details. I was just told to deliver the message," Foolish shrugged, his grip on Tubbo not faltering despite the fact that Tubbo had started kicking.

Sighing, Dream dragged a hand down his face before meeting Foolish's eyes again. "Fine. But tell them to hurry the fuck up, because we're not gonna wait forever."

"I'll pass it along," Foolish nodded. He turned to head back towards the door, but paused for the briefest of moments, locking eyes with Wilbur.

The eye contact couldn't have lasted for more than a second. But it felt like eons as Wilbur witnessed the mix of grief, regret, and something deeper than either of those flash through Foolish's gaze.

And then the moment was over. Foolish hurried towards the door, Tubbo no longer kicking but yelling obscenities the whole way down.

"No! You can't leave! Please Foolish don't- don't let them do this!"

The doors creaked as it opened once more, and Tubbo's voice faded out as he and Foolish disappeared back down the hall.

And just like that, they were gone.

Just like that, the timer was back on.

"What an annoying interruption to our conversation," Dream said as soon as the door had shut. He folded his arms over his chest, glancing down at the cloth bag and vial of blaziphane lying on the floor where Tubbo had dropped the tray. Then, he crouched down, putting the vial of blaziphane in his pocket before handing the cloth bag to Sapnap. "What's in that?"

Sapnap opened the top of the bag, peering in with narrowed eyes. "It looks like... ash?"

Sylfrwood ash. In Eldingvegrian tradition, the treatment of a body for funerals usually involved smearing a mixture of ash and blaziphane on their foreheads as a way to signal that they were rejoining the soil of Eldingvegr itself. In modern day, only those living on the furthest edges of the Røkkerring practiced this still, with the only exception being in the cases of formal executions because of how rare they were.

The difference with executions though was that the ash and blaziphane was to be applied to the guilty parties before their deaths, not after. This was supposed to act as a blessing of sorts, and a reassurance to the damned.

But Wilbur couldn't explain that to Dream and Sapnap because he was gagged. If Eret truly was just running late, they would explain the traditions as soon as they arrived.

Eret wasn't here though. And nausea crawled up Wilbur's throat as Dream picked up the dagger Tubbo had tried to stab him with off the floor.

"Y'know, it's kind of ironic that a whole host of annoyances crop up when I'm going to execute you," Dream said, testing the weight of the dagger in his hands. "It's kind of... fitting, I guess. You two have been nothing but annoyances since I took over this planet." He ran his finger along the shimmering blade, holding it up to the light to admire the rainbows dancing in the facets. "It would've been so much easier if you had just died in the invasion like you were supposed to. We wouldn't have had to put together this bullshit trial, I wouldn't have had to spend so much time worrying about being invaded by the Antarctic Empire—it would've been so easy! But no. You both had to go and make my life as difficult as possible."

Dream strolled over to Tommy, considering him for a moment, before walking around to stand in front of Wilbur.

The dagger was still in his hand. Wilbur's breathing hitched when Dream placed the tip of it against his throat.

"I blame you for that, Orpheus," Dream said, his manic smile having returned. "I doubt Theseus would've escaped on his own. I also doubt it was his idea to go to Zephys IV for protection. Am I right about that?"

Dream moved the tip of the blade away from Wilbur's throat, waiting for an answer. After several long seconds stretched between them, Wilbur nodded.

"You see, that's what pisses me off more than anything else," Dream explained, moving the dagger again so it was resting under his chin. "The fact that it was *you* causing me all these problems. Not Theseus, the heir to the throne, but you. A nobody. A bastard." He paused, and the dagger pressed harder against his throat. "I could have your head for that."

Wilbur stopped feeling the pinky he had hooked with Tommy's long ago, but the rest of his hand ached with the urge to curl into a fist.

"It's honestly frustrating that I even had to hold a trial for you!" Dream then continued, moving the dagger away to circle around them again. "Theseus, yeah, I get it. I have to hold a trial to execute the Crown Prince blah blah blah. But who even cares about the bastard prince? You don't have any claim to the throne. Technically speaking, you don't even have a claim to live here! But here you are, still flying around my head like an annoying bug."

Tommy slammed his back against the chair, trying to shout more obscenities through the gag. It all just came out as muffled screaming through, and Dream rolled his eyes.

"What, you don't like when I call Orpheus a bug?" Dream asked, strolling over to face Tommy. "You don't get it, Theseus. In a more poetic version of this story, Orpheus wouldn't be a player at all. I would've found you during the invasion, and we would've had our confrontation before I killed you. Just you and me, like it was supposed to be. The history books would say you were killed by accident in all the chaos of the invasion, and it would be considered an honorable death."

Even though he couldn't see it, Wilbur knew exactly the twisted up scowl Tommy was giving Dream right then.

"You don't get that now. Your death won't be remembered as something honorable," he continued, stepping closer to Tommy. "You're being put to death for conspiracy against an Emperor. You were likely forced to do it by your half-brother in a sad, pathetic attempt for the throne. It's an unfortunate end for both you and Orpheus. Especially since you came so close to actually posing a threat to me."

Dream pulled back from Tommy, strolling to a spot where he was in view of both of them.

“I don’t know what happened with the Antarctic Empire, but I must say, you’d have to be an idiot not to accept their help.” Dream was still grinning like a madman, and Wilbur bristled at the reminder of everything that went wrong. “I’m not sure what’s more embarrassing. The failed ‘assassination plot’ story, or the truth of it all. That you had a chance to get Emperor Philza’s help, and you fucked it up.” He twirled the dagger in his hands, eyes settling on Tommy, before flickering to Wilbur again. “I hope your tarnished reputation was worth the few extra months you got before your deaths.”

Was it worth it?

Wilbur thought back to the day they escaped Eldingvegr in that shuttle. He thought back to his overwhelming panic as he tried to decide where to go. He thought back to the shivers that ran down his spine the first time he met Phil. He thought back to every threat, every game, every power play the two shared.

Then he thought back to the fight with Tommy. To the way his entire world felt as though it had been razed to the ground when he heard the word *bastard* leave Tommy’s lips. He thought of holding onto the front of Phil’s cloak. He thought of wings wrapping around him like a shield.

And then, he thought of the moment it hit him. When Phil’s words cracked through a layer of glass he hadn’t even realized was there, and forced him to acknowledge a truth he thought he’d known.

*He deserved better.*

Even if he was going to die now, Wilbur couldn’t bring himself to regret the time he’d spent on Zephyr IV. Despite the fights, despite the betrayal, it had been worth it.

“Where the fuck is Eret?” Dream suddenly groaned, dragging his hands down his face. “I’m sick of waiting around!”

“Let me ask one of the other guards if they know-” as he moved to touch his earpiece, Sapnap was cut off by the sound of a distant explosion.

His eyes went wide. Dream’s did too.

Suddenly, Sapnap was slamming his hand against his earpiece. “Someone tell me what the *fuck* that was!” There was another explosion, louder this time, and all the blood drained out of Sapnap’s face.

It was then Wilbur realized there was noise coming from outside the throne room doors. Although it was muffled, after concentrating on it for a few moments, it was easy to figure out what it was.

Screaming.

“We’re under attack,” Sapnap whispered.

“*What?!*” Dream exclaimed, head snapping towards the doors. “By who? Have they landed any ships yet? I thought George was surveying the airspace!”

“Give me a fucking second!” Sapnap shouted, wincing as he kept his hand on his earpiece. “Can you hear me? What’s going on out there? How many ships are there?!”

Another explosion. This time, it sent a shockwave through the walls, making Sapnap and Dream both stumble.

The screaming outside the doors was louder now. Soldiers barking commands as others shouted in pain. Wilbur’s heart was racing as hope blossomed in the back of his mind. Maybe this was it. Maybe they wouldn’t die today.

“Oh no, I’m not making this mistake again,” Dream suddenly said, shoving the dagger into Sapnap’s hands. “Kill them both, *now!*”

Wilbur’s blood froze in his veins as he pressed himself against his chair, desperately trying to get as close to his brother as he could.

Sapnap glanced between the brothers, before looking out at the throne room doors. The screaming was getting worse. He winced, and brought his free hand up to his earpiece again.

“Sapnap!”

“I CAN’T!” Sapnap shouted, shoving the dagger back into Dream’s hands. “My soldiers are being slaughtered out there!”

He turned to the doors, but Dream grabbed his shoulder before he could move.

“Sapnap, as your Emperor I’m ordering you to execute these two!”

There was a beat as Sapnap considered it. He glanced between the dagger and the brothers, before gritting his teeth and pushing Dream’s hand off of him.

“If you want them dead so badly, fucking do it yourself,” Sapnap hissed. Then, he shoved Dream back, and rushed down the steps to the throne room doors.

The doors opened only a crack as Sapnap darted out, a wave of shouts and screams slipping inside. As soon as it shut, the sounds were muffled again, but it was enough to let Wilbur know there were a *lot* of soldiers out there.

His head snapped back to Dream. The dagger was still in his hands, and he was glancing between Tommy and Wilbur like he was trying to decide which one to kill first.

He locked eyes with Wilbur, and Wilbur’s heart sank.

“I’m not letting annoying bugs fly around my head any longer!” Dream shouted as he pressed the blade to Wilbur’s throat.



Wilbur couldn't breathe. The waves were deafening, crashing over and over again as saltwater filled every cell in his body. The blade was cool against his skin, and he tried to focus on the warmth of Tommy's pinky hooked with his.

And then-

*SLAM!*

Dream leapt back at the sound of something heavy slamming against the throne room doors. Wilbur's head snapped towards them just in time to hear it again. The doors buckled, but held strong, apparently having been locked by Sapnap on his way out.

For a solid two seconds, all Dream could do was stare at the doors in shock.

Then, he ran to Tommy. He let out a muffled shout, but could only watch as Dream positioned himself behind both their chairs, holding the blade against Tommy's throat. A hostage situation.

As soon as Dream had pressed the knife to Tommy's skin, the throne room doors burst open.

And for the first time, Wilbur was relieved to see a flash of pink hair.

"Don't come any closer, Technoblade!" Dream shouted, pulling Tommy's head back by his hair to expose his throat. "I'll slit his throat right now!"

In the doorway, Techno froze. He was dressed in blue and black armor, nearly half of his braid already having fallen loose. Blood—stark red against his skin—was splashed across his face and stained the battleaxe in his hands. Right then, he looked every inch the deadly Emperor he was supposed to be. He looked more than dangerous. He was downright *lethal*.

Behind him, there was a battle raging on. Essempe and Antarctic soldiers went head to head, and given the amount of acid green cloaks laying on the ground, it was pretty obvious who was winning.

"You don't wanna do that, Dream," Techno called out, the warning clear in his voice.

"And why not? You'll kill me if I do?" Dream challenged, a manic laugh bursting from his chest. "You're already gonna kill me! Why the fuck shouldn't I take the brat out before I go?"

Struggling against his restraints again, pain lanced up Wilbur's arms as the skin around his wrists was rubbed raw. Still, he tried. But his restraints were too tight.

"If you let him go, I'll give you a quick death. But if you kill him?" Techno paused, gold eyes narrowing, "I'm gonna paint the walls of this room with your blood."

A shiver ran down Wilbur's spine at the threat. It seemed to startle Dream too, considering the way his hands had started to shake.

"Fuck you, Technoblade! Either tell your soldiers to retreat right now, or you're gonna be painting the walls with both mine *and* Theseus' blood," Dream shot back, pressing the blade

closer to Tommy's throat.

For a moment, Techno was silent. He just stared at Dream, almost as if he was waiting for something.

It was only then that Wilbur's panicked mind realized that he didn't know where Phil was.

Dream seemed to have the same realization just a second too late. Because in a blur of black feathers, Dream was knocked away from Wilbur and Tommy, head slamming against the marble as Phil tackled him to the ground.

The knife clattered to the marble. A small drop of blood stained the rainbow blade, but nothing more than that.

"I think we'll have plenty of blood from just you, mate," Phil said, pinning Dream to the ground by his wrists. "How's that sound?"

Dream narrowed his eyes. "We didn't even get an alert about your ships. How did you get on the planet without us finding out?"

At this, Phil smiled, his talons digging into Dream's wrist and making the younger man wince. "You should never trust a traitor, Dream."

The realization hit Dream and Wilbur at the same time.

"Eret," Dream whispered.

"Congrats on being a damn idiot," Phil taunted, his smile cruel as the talons in Dream's wrists began to draw blood.

There was another flash of movement in the corner of Wilbur's eye, and he jolted when he saw Puffy and Techno both rushing over to Dream and Phil.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, we're gonna figure out what to do with you later," Phil said, handing Dream off to Puffy as she bound his wrists together. "I need to talk to my boys."

And just like that, Puffy was dragging Dream out of the room. The battle outside was still raging, but it was beginning to slow as more and more Essempi soldiers fell. Wilbur watched her tie a gag around Dream's mouth, before grabbing the doors and letting them slam shut again behind her.

Phil grunted as he pushed to his feet, wings arched over him and talons stained with blood. Techno offered an arm, but Phil swatted it away, brushing his own armor off before turning to face Wilbur and Tommy.

A part of Wilbur was relieved. Dream was gone. No one was holding a knife to Tommy's throat anymore. For all intents and purposes, they were saved.

But... were they?

Another part of Wilbur refused to believe it. He *couldn't* believe it was over, just like that. Because Phil and Techno were here, and they were covered in other people's blood. They'd saved Tommy and Wilbur's lives, but had they really?

Maybe it was irrational, but Wilbur couldn't believe it was okay. Not yet. The last time he'd seen Phil and Techno, he betrayed them. He used his Voice on both of them, and fled Zephyrs IV with Tommy at his side. They had to be furious with the brothers. And Wilbur was terrified to find out what the consequences of his actions were going to be.

Phil walked over to Wilbur, an unreadable expression cast over his face. They locked eyes for a moment, Wilbur's chest still rising and falling with rapid, panicked gasps. Then, he reached up, and the gag wrapped around his mouth fell to the floor.

Wilbur opened his mouth for a moment, wincing at how sore his jaw was.

He took another breath.

"Orpheus-

*"Untie us!"* Wilbur commanded, cutting Phil off.

Immediately, both Phil and Techno's eyes glazed over as they knelt down to undo his and Tommy's restraints. The ties around their ankles fell to the floor, and then their wrists. As soon as they were free, Wilbur grabbed Tommy's hand and tried to get to his feet, but fell to the floor when his legs collapsed out from under him.

Being tied to a chair for that long really wasn't good for blood flow.

Without thinking, Wilbur cried out, dragging Tommy along the ground and towards the wall. It was a frenzied scramble. Like cornered animals trying to escape the slaughter. Wilbur's thoughts were racing far too fast for him to make sense of what was going on. All he could think was,

*We could still die we could still die we could still die we could-*

They both put their backs to the wall, cowering against it under the weight of Phil and Techno's stares. Wilbur wrapped his arms around his brother, eyes burning at the fact that he was able to *hold* Tommy again. He could feel Tommy's panicked heartbeat fluttering against his chest, and he wanted to cry with relief that his heart was still beating at all.

Neither one could feel their pinkies. Still, they held each other's hands in a death grip that was tight enough to bruise.

"You didn't have to command us. We were gonna untie you anyway," Techno suddenly said.

Wilbur jumped, head snapping towards the Emperor. He and Phil were standing only a few feet away, hands stretched out like they were trying to soothe wild animals. And right then, maybe they looked a bit like animals, with their pupils blown wide and clinging to each other like they were going to be ripped apart at any moment.

It was too much. The blood on Phil and Techno's clothes. The blood in the air. The blood outside the throne room doors. Too much blood.

His heart was just about beating out of his chest, the waves slamming into him one right after the other. His head was spinning and his lungs were burning. When Phil took another step towards them, his breathing hitched, the panic only getting worse.

"D-Don't come closer!" Wilbur shouted. It was supposed to be a command. His Voice was supposed to echo across the walls, freezing Techno and Phil in place like before. But he couldn't silence the waves. Not when they were this loud. Not when there was just too much going on.

Instead of stopping, Phil held his hands up higher, with Techno doing the same. They both took careful steps towards them, and Wilbur tried to press himself further back against the wall. Tommy was crushing his hand, but he refused to pull away. He couldn't.

"It's okay," Phil said softly, crouching down in front of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wilbur saw Techno kneel beside Tommy. "We're not gonna hurt you guys."

"Yeah fucking right," Tommy gasped out, somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "You already have!"

Phil winced at this, while Wilbur heard Techno sigh behind him.

"That's- look, you don't need to be afraid of us," Phil insisted. "It's alright. You're safe now."

Now it was Wilbur's time to let out a bitter laugh. "Safe? Really?" He forced down a sob, still struggling to breathe properly. "What the fuck happens now then? To Eldingvegr? What makes us 'safe'?"

A heavy silence hung between them as Phil shared a look with Techno, his mouth pressed in a thin line. The seconds ticked on, Wilbur and Tommy's breaths still stuttering in staccato.

"You wanna know what happens next?" Phil asked, meeting Wilbur's eyes again. "No matter what, Eldingvegr belongs to the Antarctic Empire now. In a few hours, we'll start shipping all of the Essempi soldiers off the planet, and we'll get to work establishing our own soldiers here to ensure a smooth transfer."

That-

So that was it.

After all those months agonizing over negotiations, Eldingvegr belonged to the Antarctic Empire. There was nothing to sign. No terms to work through. It was over.

"As for you two," Techno continued, distracting Wilbur from the burning in his eyes. "You have a choice to make."

Immediately, both Wilbur and Tommy tensed.

“A choice?” Tommy questioned.

“Yup. A choice,” Phil nodded. “We understand that we never got around to finishing our negotiations, and you might not want to stay on an Eldingvegr that’s under our control. And if you don’t want to stay here, we’re not holding you prisoner. We can load you up with a ship full of supplies, and you can go wherever in the galaxy you want. I’d recommend an Outer Sector planet so Dream won’t find you, but we won’t hunt you down. You’d be free to live your lives how you please.”

...leaving?

It wasn’t an option Wilbur thought they’d be given. The choice to just leave Eldingvegr entirely. They wouldn’t get their planet back, but they wouldn’t have to stay under Antarctic rule either. They could put all of this behind them. It would be the two of them. Alone.

For some reason, that sounded like the worst outcome he could imagine.

“What’s the other option?” Wilbur asked, his chest aching at the idea of leaving his whole life behind.

There was the faintest hint of a smile on Phil’s face as he met Wilbur’s eyes again, before his gaze flickered to Tommy.

“Theseus,” he began, making Tommy stiffen. “You might be young, but you’re so much smarter than I think anyone gives you credit for. You’re constantly underestimated, but Techno and I both agree, as a King, you could be a force to be reckoned with.”

“You’re also one of the most talented fighters I’ve ever trained,” Techno chimed in, resting a hand on Tommy’s arm. “I don’t say that lightly. You have natural intuition that takes years for most soldiers to develop.” He paused, moving his hand up to Tommy’s shoulder. “But you’re inexperienced—both with fighting and as a leader.”

Humming, Phil nodded in agreement. “Our goal with taking over Eldingvegr isn’t to run it into the ground. We’re not going to drain your planet of its blaziphane to fill our own pockets in the short-run. Instead, we want it to flourish. You’re already at the seat of an economic powerhouse. We want to make sure it stays that way, and only grows stronger.”

“Eldingvegr needs protection,” Techno added. “Essempi’s invasion proved that it *can* be won. If we don’t take Eldingvegr into the Empire, you would become the biggest target in the galaxy.”

“Theseus,” Phil jumped in, “with our help, you could become one of the greatest kings Eldingvegr has ever had.”

Tommy was silent, his breathing slowing down as the tension began to leak out of his shoulders.

Suddenly, Phil’s eyes flickered to Wilbur, and his heart skipped a beat in his chest.

“And Orpheus,” he began, something warm curling around his voice. “You are so young, but so powerful. So overlooked by everyone around you. I never understood the obsession royals have with blood, but those frustrations only grew when I met you. Anyone who looked at you and only ever saw a bastard was a fool, because you are *so* much more than that.”

He paused, flashing him a small smile. “When you used your Voice on me in the hangar, I wasn’t just shocked. I’ve never felt so completely and utterly helpless in my life, and *you* did that to me. The entire time you’d been on Zephys IV, you never gave that up. Not once.”

“You lied when you translated those Themisians texts, didn’t you?” Techno chimed in, raising an eyebrow at him.

His heart was pounding in his chest in time with the waves that were still washing over him. He nodded once, before looking back at Phil.

Phil’s smile grew. “You lead us to believe half-sirens didn’t even have the ability to use their Voices. You held that card so close to your chest, it wasn’t something either of us even considered until we were in that hangar, unable to move. And all I could think of was how *proud* I was of you.”

So he was right. That was pride he saw in Phil’s smile that day in the hangar.

“You were raised to be your brother’s advisor, but you could be so much more than that,” Phil continued, his voice soft. “That doesn’t mean you have to leave your brother behind. But you can stretch your wings. You can reach for something more, and I *know* you can make it.”

He paused again, reaching out to rest a hand on his cheek, and Wilbur wanted nothing more than to lean into the warmth.

“You’re already something great,” Phil whispered. “You just have to let yourself be.”

And Wilbur-

Wilbur wanted to believe it. He wanted to believe it so bad. The want was a dark and needy thing twisting and clawing inside his chest. It was wanting to be recognized as more. It was wanting the potential inside of him to be seen. It was wanting someone *to believe in him*.

“Was any-” Wilbur’s voice cracked, and he took a breath to try and steady himself, the waves in his mind finally beginning to slow. “Was any of it real?” He whispered. “The things you told me? The... The affection? Or were you just trying to manipulate me?”

And Phil’s smile faded at this, pulling his hand back, but he didn’t seem angry at the question. If anything, the look on his face was closer to understanding, along with that same pride still shining underneath it all.

“In the beginning, yes, it was a manipulation tactic. I was trying out several things, from intimidating you to challenging you, because I was interested to see how you’d react. And then I switched things up, trying to come off like I understood you so you’d be more willing to trust me. That’s why we were using Ranboo. So we could learn more about how you two

were doing, and use it to our advantage.” He paused, as if he was struggling to find his own words. “I don’t know when it switched. But at some point, I realized it wasn’t a tactic anymore. I genuinely wanted to help you and see you grow into the best version of yourself. So yes, it was real.”

Wilbur couldn’t breathe again. His throat was closing up, tears blurring his vision because that had been what he wanted to hear for so long. And yet-

“How am I supposed to trust you?” He asked in a broken voice. “How do I know we aren’t just playing another game? That this isn’t another tactic you’re trying out?”

Tommy squeezed his hand as a silent reminder he was there. Wilbur tightened the arm he had wrapped around Tommy’s middle.

“Orpheus, you have a Voice,” Phil pointed out after a long moment of silence. “Use it.”

He was telling him to use his Voice.

Phil was granting him permission to use his Voice on him to see if he was telling the truth.

The waves had finally settled themselves in Wilbur’s head enough for him to breathe. He shut his eyes, counting each wave as it rolled in and out, letting his heartbeat slow even further.

Then,

*”Are you telling me the truth?”*

The command was weak. Far weaker than Wilbur’s Voice normally was, and he knew it was because of how he was barely holding himself together. But it still echoed deep into his bones, and even though it scraped painfully against his throat, he was relieved to hear it work.

“Yes,” Phil answered immediately. “Everything I’ve said is the truth.”

*Oh.*

There was another question Wilbur needed to ask. One that he was terrified of even putting into words, because the moment he did, there was no going back. It was putting a name to the thing he swore he’d never say out loud, because it has always seemed impossible.

But Phil cared, and Wilbur once thought that was impossible. So maybe, just maybe, this wasn’t impossible either.

“You once told me that little bird was a nickname parents on Elytra used for their children,” Wilbur whispered, his voice hoarse.

Phil nodded. “It is.”

Heart pounding in his ears, Wilbur took another breath to try and force the words out.

“What am I to you, then?”

For a moment, Phil was silent. For a moment, Wilbur couldn't feel Tommy's hand gripping his own. For a moment, nothing else existed in the universe except the two of them.

“I've never been a parental person,” Phil began, eyes falling to the ground. “I never wanted children. I liked kids alright, but that just wasn't something I ever considered for myself. I never thought of myself as a father to anyone. And I figured that if I was, I'd be a pretty shit one.” He paused, eyes flickering up to meet Wilbur's again. “And then I met you.”

The burning was back. It was back, and Wilbur was struggling to keep himself from falling apart.

“When I first realized how attached I was getting to you, I got scared. I'm not the sort of man to make attachments easily, because I know all the ways those things can be used against you. So I tried to push that all away, and told myself I just saw you as a protege. Someone with potential I could mold into something great.” Phil blinked, his brows furrowed like it was a battle to admit any of this. “It was getting harder and harder to lie to myself though. Not to mention, Techno kept calling me out on my bullshit the more I pushed it.”

“You suck at lying and we both know it,” Techno huffed.

Phil rolled his eyes. “Maybe he's right. It certainly wasn't fucking working, but I kept trying to avoid it.” His face then took on a somber note. “Then you and Theseus left.”

The guilt—the oil slick guilt that twisted in his gut the night they left was back, making Wilbur nauseous as he watched Phil take a breath to steady himself.

“Being a parent is fucking terrifying,” he admitted. “I know that now. Because even though I was proud of you for your Voice, the minute I learned Dream had taken you... that he'd taken my *son*... I don't know if I've ever been that scared in my entire life.”

There it was.

It was real. The very thing Wilbur had been too terrified to put into words was real.

Phil saw him as a son.

Suddenly, Phil was stretching a hand out between them again.

His talons were still stained with Dream's blood. The same talons that had gently brushed the bruises on his face from his fight with Quackity. The same talons that traced circles into the back of his neck when he was upset.

“If you let me, I could give you the galaxy, Orpheus.”

This was the choice.

Leave for an Outer Sector planet. Spend the rest of their days completely free of their burdens. No politics, no birthrights. Just him and Tommy, always together.



Or they could stay. They would still be together. And they could both be *more*.

Wilbur looked down at Tommy, who was still pressed into his side. Techno had a hand resting on his shoulder, and he seemed to be leaning into it just as much as he was leaning into Wilbur.

They locked eyes, and Wilbur asked a silent question. *What do you want to do?*

Tommy blinked, a strange calm washing over him. He squeezed Wilbur's hand, and Wilbur knew what his answer would be without it needing to be said out loud.

*I'll follow you anywhere.*

This was Wilbur's decision to make.

He looked back at Phil's outstretched hand. At those deadly, blood-stained hands. The gentle hands of a father.

Phil said he was already great, and just had to let himself be. Phil wanted to see him take more than what fate offered him. Phil was offering him the galaxy. Wilbur just needed the ambition to take it.

And Wilbur-

He wanted to be ambitious. He wanted to have power. He wanted to be *more*.

"Wilbur," he whispered, putting his free hand into Phil's. "Call me Wilbur."

Phil smiled, and it was the same one he saw in the hangar. One full of pride. Pride and *love*.

"Wilbur," Phil repeated in an almost awed whisper.

The last piece holding the dam together cracked, and Wilbur fell apart.

Without thinking, he threw himself onto Phil, the burning finally reaching its peak as tears flowed down his cheeks. Without any hesitation, Phil wrapped his arms around him, holding him tight as his wings arched above them like a shield.

Tommy was still attached to his side, and Wilbur used one arm to hug his little brother, and the other to hug his-

His father.

"It's okay, Wil," Phil reassured him, rubbing his hand up and down his back. "It's over now. You're both safe. I got you."

All at once, he was hit with the realization of just how close he'd come to death. A few seconds too late, and he would've bled out on the floor. He wouldn't have seen Phil again. He wouldn't have realized that he could actually have all of it. Those things he was too afraid to even admit he wanted.

More sobs forced their way out of his throat. He buried his face in Phil's shoulder, distantly feeling Tommy detach himself from his side as Phil wrapped him in his wings completely. He looked up for a moment and saw Techno whispering to Tommy, their foreheads pressed together and hands gripped tightly between each other. But then, Tommy caught his eye, and gave him an almost imperceptible nod. That he was okay. They were both okay.

Wilbur wasn't sure how long he sat on the floor like that, sobbing into Phil's shoulder while Phil whispered his name over and over to remind him he was alright. Eventually though, the tears dried up, and the rest of his panic did too.

He pulled away from Phil's shoulder, his eyes swollen and red as could be.

"Oh little bird," Phil murmured. "I'm so glad you're alright."

Wilbur sniffled. "Thanks to you."

Phil snorted. "I suppose that's true. I would tell you off for how stupid deciding to run away was, but I think you've figured that part out already."

"Yeah," Wilbur nodded, face falling. "I know."

Brows furrowing, Phil buried his face in Wilbur's hair, an unsteady breath rattling through his lungs.

"It's okay. It's all okay now."

For some reason, it sounded like Phil was trying to tell himself that more than Wilbur.

After sitting like that for another few minutes in silence, Phil opened up his wings, and helped Wilbur to his feet. He stumbled a bit, legs still shaky after everything, but he got his footing after a moment.

As soon as he was upright, Tommy was pressed against his side. Wilbur grabbed his hand again (despite how sore his was already—it was definitely going to bruise), and when he looked down at his little brother, he noticed a small drop of dried blood on his throat. A place where Dream had pressed just a little too hard.

Even though there were no tears left inside him, his eyes burned again, and he quickly pressed a kiss to the top of Tommy's head. He'd gotten so close to losing him. Way too fucking close.

He glanced up, and found himself locking eyes with Techno. There was understanding in the gold, and Wilbur remembered the fury in his voice when Dream threatened to slit Tommy's throat.

Wilbur nodded at Techno. A silent thanks.

Techno nodded back. An understanding had passed between them.

“Um, so-” Tommy coughed once, his words rough despite not even having used his Voice, “so what happens now? Are they still fighting outside or-”

“The fighting ended a little while ago,” Techno told them, making his way down the steps towards the throne room doors. “But we do have one thing we need to do before we can really get things moving.”

The throne room doors creaked open. Puffy walked in, dragging a bound and gagged Dream along with her. He was hunched over, bright green eyes filled with unbridled rage as he glanced between the four men in the room.

Phil rested a hand on the back of Wilbur’s neck. Tommy was still attached to his side, refusing to let go of him again. On Tommy’s other side, Techno had a hand on his shoulder.

“What do you guys wanna do with him?” Puffy asked, pushing Dream’s shoulders so he was kneeling on the ground.

“Well,” Phil said, smirking at Wilbur. “I think you two get the right to decide what happens to him. Considering he tried to kill you and all.”

They had the leader of the Essempi Empire tied up and gagged at their feet. The fighting had ended, but things were still settling.

Anything could happen in the chaos of an invasion like that. Even to an Emperor.

Wilbur looked at Tommy again. This was a decision they had to make together.

The icy flames were back in Tommy’s eyes. Burning low but bright as he glanced between Wilbur and Dream, absently rubbing at the mark on his throat. Then, he looked up at Wilbur, and gave a small nod.

Again, Wilbur knew exactly what Tommy was telling him even without words. And he was relieved, because he’d been thinking the exact same thing.

He looked back at Dream. He looked at the man who had invaded their planet, who tormented their nightmares for months, who called him a bug and taunted them over and over and over again. He looked at the monster who held a dagger to his throat, and then to his little brother’s throat.

The waves were back. The saltwater was in his lungs, and it wasn’t drowning him anymore. He let the anger swell, rising up inside of him more and more until he could feel it in his throat. The anger he’d pressed down his entire life. The anger Phil had told him to *use*.

Wilbur knew what he wanted to do with Dream.

“I want his fucking *head*.”

BEFORE YOU GET MAD IN THE COMMENTS NIKI IS GOING TO APPEAR IN THE EPILOGUE seriously please don't comment getting mad that she wasn't in this chapter, this has been my plan since the beginning. If you wanted her to show up and save the day well, sorry, that's just not what my plan was.

OK ANYWAY I hope you guys enjoyed!! I've seriously had that conversation with AE duo and then the final line planned for so long, my heart was literally pounding when I wrote it. I'm just so proud of how this story has turned out. It's become everything I wanted it to be and more. I'll write a longer sappier end note when the epilogue comes out, but just know that it means so much that you guys have come on this journey with me. This is the longest fic I've ever written, and I'm so unbelievably proud of it.

I don't know when the epilogue is going to come out. I'll try to write it relatively quickly, but I'm gonna be pretty busy for the next week so we'll have to see.

please let me know your thoughts on this finale down in the comments below. I really, really hope you guys enjoyed the journey here. I know I certainly did.

(REMINDER! If you like my work and wanna see more, I just started my next big project! it's another wilbur-centric story, this time with cyberpunk and fantasy elements and even more fun worldbuilding! it's crimeboys-centric as well, and I think you guys are really gonna like it. so check out [through a glass divine](#) it'll start updating regularly once stars is over! make sure to subscribe!)

if you want to scream about this chapter with others, I have a discord server!  
<https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

check out the spotify playlist for this fic [here](#)

hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees :)

# the stars reached back

## Chapter Summary

Everything that happened after.

## Chapter Notes

well. this is it. for real this time.

I'm gonna have a whole lot to say in the end notes of this, so I won't keep you here long. thank you for coming on this journey with me. I hope you like the ending :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### **Three years later**

The surface of the planet was colder than he expected.

An icy breeze whipped around him, forcing his hood off his head and his scarf to slip down from his face. Sand stung against his cheeks and eyes, and he coughed once, tugging the scarf back up over his mouth to block out the dust as much as he could.

His footsteps fell in time with those of the soldiers behind him. He'd insisted he only needed one, but was forced to take five instead.

While he was grateful for the protection, it made him stick out like a sore thumb. The shimmering greys and blues of the Antarctic Empire uniforms were recognizable even on a planet as far out as this one. His own coat—dotted with stars and dyed a much softer shade of grey—was undoubtedly wealthy, but at the very least didn't scream where he came from.

The prince and his soldiers marched away from the trading port and into the desert, the gutted remains of crashed ships littering the sand like corpses. The wind got stronger, and he pulled his scarf tighter around his face. His coat twisted around his legs, and he narrowed his eyes, struggling to see through the haze.

His eyes were burning by the time they reached the place he was looking for. The ruined ship reminded him of the bones of a monstrous sea creature that had been pecked away at by bottom feeders. Warped metal reached into the sky like fingers. The wind howled as it rattled through hollowed out windows. No one would live in a place like this if they had any other choice.

As the details of the crashed ship came into view, he held a hand up, stopping the soldiers behind him in their tracks.

“You wait here,” he ordered the soldiers. “I’ll go in alone.”

Behind him, there was a scoff.

“No you’re fucking not, Wil,” Jack argued, folding his arms over his chest as he stepped up beside him. “You have no clue what could be waiting for you in there.”

Wilbur clenched his jaw. “I know what’s in there,” he insisted, eyes locked on the ship. “And I need to do this alone.”

A crease appeared between Jack’s brows as he frowned at him. Over the past few years, his scrawny guard hadn’t changed much. His face had thinned out some, and he filled out his uniform slightly more than he did when they first met, but for the most part, he was the same person Wilbur met that first morning on Zephyr IV.

Of course, things weren’t exactly the same as they were back then. Although Jack understood why Wilbur did what he did in the hangar that fateful night, something had cracked in the glass between their friendship that could never quite be repaired. Despite the countless nights they’d spent drinking and laughing together since then, there was always going to be a level of distrust sitting behind his mismatched eyes when Wilbur spoke to him. Like he was still waiting for Wilbur’s next words to be a command, even though Wilbur had promised to never do that to him again.

Wilbur didn’t resent Jack for this. In fact, he was grateful that the distrust was still there in every look he gave him. Because Wilbur had been tempted. Oh, he was tempted even now, his skin bristling as Jack refused to obey an order he *knew* he was within his right to give.

But when he met Jack’s eyes, clouded by the sand swirling between them, the pressure in his throat died down as soon as it appeared. Because that’s what Jack was expecting. And Wilbur still held onto the hope that one day, Jack wouldn’t expect a betrayal from him anymore.

“Just you then. The others will wait here,” Wilbur relented, giving the rest of the soldiers pointed looks.

A hint of a smile flashed over Jack’s face. “Sounds good to me.”

The soldiers stood their ground as Wilbur and Jack made their way to the ship on their own. Tears were welling up in the corners of his eyes now from the sand, and he scowled when he glanced over and saw Jack wearing a self-satisfied smirk, a pair of goggles he’d bought from the trading port sitting snugly against his face.

“Told you these were a good idea,” Jack bragged, the blue and red lenses glinting in the faint light.

Wilbur huffed. “You got ripped off by that seller.”

This only made Jack grin wider. “Good thing it’s coming out of your royal allowance and not my paycheck, eh?”

He elbowed Wilbur playfully, and Wilbur couldn’t help but crack a smile as he elbowed him back. “I don’t know why I brought you with me.”

“Because it was either gonna be me or Puffy, and we both know you’re a sucker for the classic Jack Manifold charm.”

“More like a victim of it,” Wilbur muttered, rolling his eyes.

Jack opened his mouth to protest that, but quickly closed it as the shadow of the ship fell over them both. Wilbur’s heart skipped a beat, and he held a hand up at Jack, gesturing for him to wait as he crept over to the tattered cloth hanging over the entrance ramp of the ship.

His boots clinked against the metal as he listened for any signs of life inside. While he couldn’t make out anything, the howling wind was drowning out everything else.

“I need you to stay here,” Wilbur told Jack as he hurried back down the ramp.

“But Wilbur-”

“I’m serious,” he snapped, cutting Jack off. “You can wait right outside the entrance, and if you hear me yell for you, you can run in. But I need you to wait. Please.”

Jack was frowning again, but the desperation in Wilbur’s voice was clear as day.

A beat passed. And then another.

Then,

“Fine. But if you’re not out in five minutes, I’m going in anyway.”

“Fifteen,” Wilbur argued.

“Ten minutes, or I’m telling Tommy that you’re the one who lost his favorite dagger.”

Oh, that was a low blow.

“Fine,” Wilbur huffed, turning on his heel to go back up the ramp. “You’re a bitch, Jack Manifold!”

“A bitch who keeps you alive!” Jack shouted back.

Rolling his eyes again, Wilbur focused back on the task at hand. He pulled the scarf back over his face, and tugged his hood over his head to block out as much wind as possible. His heart was pounding as he stood in front of the tattered cloth, the inside of the ship completely dark past the entryway.

Once again, he tried to listen for any signs of life, but all he heard was screaming wind.

Taking a breath to steady himself, Wilbur tried to tune out the elements around him. He ignored the sand cutting into his face, and fought to focus on the salt burning the back of his throat.

*In for four, out for eight. Let the waves crash into your lungs.*

He opened his eyes, water roaring in his ears. Then, he pushed aside the cloth, and stepped inside the ship.

The thud of his boots against metal echoed off the ceiling. The inside of the ship was dark, the dim light from outside creeping in through cracks in the walls. His eyes darted around, searching for any kind of movement. A single sign of life.

Someone was obviously living here. There was a cot piled high with hand-sewn blankets and pillows shoved in the corner, sitting next to a table covered with an array of deadly knives. There was another table littered with scrap from the ship itself—old technology probably used for bartering back at the trade port.

He took another step, jolting when his boot hit something solid. Glancing down, he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it was just a half-empty crate of dried food.

Right as he looked back up though, a voice called out.

*"Don't move."*

The command reverberated through his bones, echoing through his body and forcing every cell to obey without question. His muscles locked, keeping him staring straight ahead as he heard footsteps approach behind him.

"That guy at the port was right," Wilbur murmured, relieved she'd left him the ability to speak even if he couldn't move. "You're really here."

The footsteps behind him paused. Then, he saw a pale hand wrap around his neck from behind, before a frigid blade pressed against his throat.

"Someone sold me out?" The voice hissed, a few pink strands of hair barely visible in his peripheral vision. "Who?"

"The vendor you sell your scrap metal to," Wilbur answered. He knew he should be afraid right now, but he couldn't focus on anything except the fact that she was *here*. "He told us there's a siren living in the ship graveyard, and that you come to the port every few months to get supplies."

The voice cursed softly.

"I know your friend is waiting outside," she said after a moment. "If you think you can kill me on your own, you're wrong."

"I'm not here to kill you," Wilbur told her, his chest aching with the desire to turn around.



She scoffed. “Yeah right. You’re Antarctic soldiers. Either you’re here to tie up Eldingvegr’s loose ends, or if you’re not lying, then you’re here to drag me back to Themis.” The blade pressed harder against this throat. “I’m not letting either one of those things happen.”

A pause. Wilbur took a careful breath.

“Lady Niki Nihachu, Emissary to the Order of Anthemoessa,” Wilbur said, the familiar title rolling easily off his tongue despite so many years having passed since he heard it. “You were on Eldingvegr when it was invaded by Essempi three years ago. All Themisian ambassadors were sent back to Themis, but you weren’t. Why is that?”

Behind him, Niki tensed at her name, the hand not holding the knife digging into his shoulder.

“Why do you think? I was imprisoned and alone, and I had no clue what Emperor Dream was going to do to me. I’d been aban-” she cut herself off, the pressure on his throat lessening the slightest bit. “I was alone, and I was terrified. I didn’t know if I was going to be sent back to Themis like the others, but I also didn’t want to wait to find out. So I left.”

“You thought you were going to be punished for helping the princes escape, right?” Wilbur asked, his voice low.

A beat passed. Then, the pressure returned.

“Oh, I know who you are,” Niki said, something dangerous curling around her words. “I was wondering why you had a different coat than the other Antarctic soldiers, but I think I figured it out.” She paused, readjusting her grip on the dagger. “We hear rumors even this far out in the Outer Sector. Rumors of Emperor Philza taking on a protege. Someone who can turn the tides of war with just a few words. Who makes it a point to know everything going on in the galaxy, because that’s what lets him control all the players.”

Despite the knife pressed to his throat, Wilbur couldn’t help but smile.

“Do you know his name? Or anything about who this protege could be?”

Niki hesitated before responding.

“No, I don’t. There are a few theories as to who it is but-” her breathing hitched, her grip on the dagger faltering once again. “I don’t think they’re true.”

A heavy silence hung between them. The waves crashed against the shore of his mind, over and over and over again.

The knife stung as it dug into his skin, and he could feel blood welling up against the blade.

*“Drop the knife, and pull down my scarf to see my face,”* Wilbur ordered, his Voice echoing off the walls of the ship.

And just like how instantaneous Niki’s command was on him, the knife clattered to the ground, and the pink hair moved away from the corner of his eye. There was the sound of

footsteps as Niki circled around him, and when she came into his line of sight, his breath caught in his throat.

She looked older. Her cheeks had lost the last pudgy remnants of childhood, making the rest of her features more pointed in contrast. Her jaw was sharper, and her short-sleeved shirt revealed well-muscled arms. There was a thin grey cloak settled over her shoulders, and the minute his eyes fell on the gold embroidery along the hem, he recognized it as one of his own coats he'd worn on Eldingvegr before the invasion.

The last time he'd seen her, it had been with a barrier shimmering between them as she begged him not to leave her behind. Now, she was here, with no barrier in their way. And she didn't look like the type of person to beg anymore.

Silver eyes—once so familiar in their warmth—were ice cold despite the fog over them. She reached up to grab his scarf, tugging it down to his neck and revealing the rest of his face.

The glazed look in her eyes cleared as soon as the action was finished. She blinked once as she came back to herself, before her gaze settled on him, and she froze.

Seconds ticked by. Wilbur's heart was pounding again, because finding her was the easy part. Now, he had to talk to her.

"No," she whispered after a moment. "No that's- this isn't real. You're not here." She took a step back from him, her hands shaking as she wrapped them around herself. "I haven't- I haven't had a nightmare like this in so long. I thought I'd gotten past them. But you can't be here so this has to be one of those-"

Hearing that he'd been the subject of her nightmares was more painful than if she'd slit his throat only a few moments before.

"Niki," Wilbur said as softly as he could. "This isn't a nightmare. It's me."

Niki was shaking her head now, blinking fast as she grabbed the edge of a table behind her. "No. No no no- this isn't real. Please tell me you're not actually here."

"I am here. I swear," Wilbur insisted. "Just- drop the command. Let me move and I can show you-"

"No!" She shouted, cutting him off. "I don't want you coming anywhere near me, Wilbur!"

Wincing, Wilbur tried to nod at that before remembering he couldn't. "Okay. You're pissed at me. I get that."

At this, Niki frowned, tears welling up in her eyes as she met his gaze again. "Pissed?" She questioned, that dangerous thing decorating her words again. "It's not- I mean, I am pissed but it's not just being pissed, Wilbur. I'm-" Her voice cracked, and she gripped the table harder, her knuckles turning white as she squeezed her eyes shut.

A few moments passed. Niki let out a shuddering breath before her eyes opened again.

“Why are you here?” She asked, her voice thick. “After all this time, why have you come to find me now?”

Oh. Of course she wouldn’t know, but a pang flashed through his chest realizing that for the first time since they met, he and Niki had fallen completely out of step with each other's lives.

“Niki, I didn’t just come to find you now,” Wilbur told her, forcing himself to meet her eyes. “I’ve been looking for you for *years*.”

This seemed to strike a chord in Niki.

“Really?”

“Of course I have!” Wilbur exclaimed. “I started searching for you as soon as things got settled with the Antarctic Empire and Eldingvegr. I used any connection I had to the Outer Sector, found any ears on the ground I could, and searched for ages to find you. I chased so many leads that just turned to dead ends. But finally, a few days ago, I heard rumors of a lone siren living out here. And somehow, I knew it had to be you.”

Niki stared at him for a moment, as if she still wasn’t trusting her own eyes.

Then,

“I waited for you, you know,” she confessed, taking a step towards him. “I waited on Eldingvegr as long as I could, because I thought you and Tommy would come back to get me.”

“I wanted to. I swear Niki, I wanted to go back and get you but it took us far longer than we expected to get back to Eldingvegr. And by the time we did, you were long gone.”

“I had to leave,” Niki said, her voice cracking again as she continued to walk towards him. “I- I thought Dream was going to kill me, or at least torture me if he thought I knew where you went.” She let out a quiet snuffle as she came face to face with him.

“I’m so sorry,” Wilbur whispered, his own words wavering as he looked down at her. “I didn’t want to leave you, but we didn’t have another choice.”

A beat passed as Niki looked up at his face, her eyes bright red as she fought to hold back her tears.

Then,

“You left me!”

A fist thumped against his chest, and although it didn’t hurt, Wilbur winced anyway.

“You left me there by myself!”

Another thump.

“You abandoned me!”

Thump.

“You betrayed me!”

*Thump.*

“You-”

Niki’s fist froze mid air before she could hit his chest again. Her breathing was ragged, and she stared at the ground for a moment, the silence stretched taut between them like a wire.

“I thought you were dead!” She sobbed, fingers twisting into the front of his shirt. “No one told me anything! I waited for you to come back but when you didn’t I thought you might’ve died trying to escape and-” she gasped as another sob wracked her shoulders. “I had to leave. I left, and nearly a full year later the news reached the Outer Sector. That you and- and Tommy were alive. You were alive and you’d joined the Antarctic Empire.”

*Oh.*

A moment of silence hung between them. Apologies that didn’t need to be said out loud prickled over his skin.

“Looking back on it, I know there was no way for you to get me out of that cell,” Niki murmured after a minute, still clutching the front of his shirt. “If you’d stayed any longer, you both would’ve gotten killed. I was panicking and couldn’t see that then, and later on I kept telling myself you betrayed me so the fact that you were dead would hurt less.” She took a shuddering breath, resting her forehead against his shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault though. It never was.”

And that-

That was something Wilbur never thought he’d hear.

*It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t-*

His own breathing hitched as his eyes began to burn. He took an unsteady breath, and Niki glanced up, her glowing freckles making the tear tracks on her cheeks shimmer.

“I missed you so much,” she whispered.

There she was. His best friend. His pillar of support.

His own pillar crumbled into the ocean long ago. But it seemed like hers had as well, and now they were both under the waves, having learned how to accept them.

“I missed you too.”

More tears brimmed in Niki’s eyes.

*"You can move."*

As soon as the command echoed from her whisper, Wilbur nearly collapsed on her. She let out a surprised squeak as he wrapped his arms around her, but she didn't fight it. Instead, she hugged him back just as tight, the two adjusting until his chin was resting on top of her head, and her face was buried in his shoulder.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The sand swirled around them, stinging at their eyes and filling up their lungs, but Wilbur didn't care, and he doubted Niki did either. He'd been waiting years to be with his best friend again, and he didn't want to let her go anytime soon.

Niki pulled away first. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, the jagged ends of her uneven haircut sticking to her wet cheeks.

"So," she said, looking him up and down again, "the Antarctic Empire, huh?"

Oh. Yeah. Wilbur had a lot of explaining to do on that front.

"It's a long story," Wilbur told her, looking down at his coat with a soft smile. "But would you believe me if I said joining the Empire was the best decision Tommy and I ever made?"

She raised an eyebrow at this, clearly doubtful. "Really?"

Wilbur nodded. "Yeah, it was." He paused, another breath rattling through his lungs. "Fuck, there's so much to tell you. But we should probably get out of here before my guard thinks you killed me."

Niki frowned. "Get out of here? And go where?"

"Oh, Niki." Wilbur stepped towards her again. "There's so many places I want to show you. So many planets, so many people I want you to meet- oh fuck, Tommy's gonna be thrilled to see you again-"

Immediately, Niki took a step back. "Wilbur, I can't go back."

A rock dropped into the pit of Wilbur's stomach.

"What?"

"I've been hiding out in the middle of nowhere for a reason," Niki said, folding her arms over her chest. "I don't know if Essempi's hunting me, but even if they aren't, I'm sure Themis has been searching across the galaxy for me and I just- I can't go back to them. You know why I can't."

And just like that, the rock disintegrated.

"You don't have to worry about Essempi," he reassured her, "and you certainly don't have to worry about Themis. You're under Antarctic protection now. No one's going to lay a hand on you. Ever."

Furrowing her brows, Niki glanced at his coat again. “Why would the Antarctic Empire care about me enough to offer me protection? Just because I’m friends with the royalty of one of the planets under their control doesn’t mean-”

“Trust me, you’re under my protection, which means you’re under Antarctic protection,” Wilbur insisted, cutting her off.

The confusion was practically bouncing off of Niki as she considered the implications of that. “Wilbur, what am I not getting here?”

“Again, it’s a long story. But to put it, um, bluntly,” he paused, biting the inside of his cheek, “Emperor Philza is... my dad.”

There was a beat of silence as Niki processed this.

Then,

“Excuse me, *what?!?*”

“It’s a lot to explain but he’s kind of my adoptive father and-”

“Wilbur?!?”

Wilbur was cut off by the sound of footsteps echoing through the ship, and Niki stiffened as Jack ran up to both of them, skidding to a stop the second he locked eyes with Niki.

“Niki, don’t!” Wilbur exclaimed as Niki opened her mouth to use her Voice. “This is my guard. He’s okay.”

Although Niki seemed unsure, she closed her mouth again, but still crouched down to pick her dagger up off the floor.

“Is this her?” Jack asked, having pulled his goggles up on his forehead.

Wilbur nodded. “Yeah, this is her. Lady Niki Nihachu,” he introduced with a grin. “Niki, this is Jack Manifold, my personal guard.”

“Holy shit, it’s so fucking cool to finally meet you, Lady Nihachu. Wil’s told me a ton about you,” Jack told her, giving her a quick bow.

Niki blinked, as if dazed as she watched Jack straighten up from his bow.

Then, with stiff, unpracticed movements, she attempted to curtsy at Jack, despite the fact that she was wearing pants instead of a skirt.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you...” she trailed off, unsure of what to call him.

“Jack is fine,” he quickly said.

Nodding, Niki gave him a small smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Jack. And if Wil’s given you permission to use his personal name, then feel free to just call me Niki as well.”

Jack smiled at this. But before he could respond, there was a hissing sound as more sand slammed against the walls of the ship, and just as quickly his smile disappeared.

“Well, as great as this is, I do think we should get going soon if we’re gonna leave. The sandstorm is getting pretty bad out there.”

Shit. Yeah, Wilbur forgot they were on limited time with that.

His own smile falling away, Wilbur gave Jack a subtle nod, before turning back to face Niki.

“There’s a lot I need to catch you up on, but like I said, you won’t have to worry about Essemi or Themis if you come with me,” Wilbur said, meeting Niki’s eyes again.

Niki furrowed her brows, conflict dancing across her face as she glanced between Wilbur and the makeshift bedroom behind her.

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “I’ve been hiding out here for three years now. It’s not the best, but it’s familiar, y’know?” She pursed her lips, her frown deepening. “I’m not the same person I was, Wil. And I don’t want you to be disappointed when you realize that.”

The thing was, Wilbur had already realized that. Because Niki was so different from the girl he remembered. It wasn’t just because her hair was shorter and her eyes were colder. It was in the way she spoke. The way she held a knife. Even just the way she carried herself held a different tone than before.

Pieces of the Niki he knew had been chipped away. Her shoulders were rigid, and her face was lined with horrors he knew all too well. They were both twenty-two now, but he often got mistaken for older, and he was sure she did too. Because there was something dark behind both of their eyes. The mistakes they were haunted by. The exhaustion that had made a permanent home for itself in their bones.

But beneath all the changes, it was still her voice. Her voice and her words, her hands and her smile. She was different, but she was still Niki. She was still his best friend.

“I’ve changed too.” Taking a step towards her, Wilbur held out his hand palm-up. A silent offer. “For a long time, after everything happened, I wasn’t even able to recognize myself in the mirror.”

Niki winced, like she knew exactly what that was like.

“Once, you asked me if I wanted more,” Wilbur continued, taking another step. “You asked if I wanted to be more than just Tommy’s advisor. If I wanted to try and aim for something higher.” He paused, staring at the hand hanging between them. “Niki, I’ve become *more*. More than I ever dreamed of being. And you can too.”

Another beat passed.

“I don’t just want you by my side, I need you there. I need you as my right hand. And together, I know we could do so much.”

Something lodged itself in Wilbur’s throat, and he forced himself to swallow it down as his arm began to ache.

“Niki,” he whispered, “don’t you want more?”

And Niki was blinking fast now, her shoulders shaking the longer she stared at his outstretched hand.

A moment passed.

And then another.

The waves were crashing on top of him again, but he didn’t drown in them. He just kept breathing in the saltwater, and waited to see if Niki was going to breathe it in with him.

Then, a scarred and calloused hand gripped his own, but the webbing between her fingers was just as soft as ever.



“Tommy! You in here?”

There was a flash of blonde as Tommy poked his head up from the couch. Wilbur stood in the doorway, and as soon as Tommy’s eyes landed on him, his face lit up like the sun itself.

“Wil!”

Without warning, he launched himself over the couch towards his brother at full speed. Wilbur grunted as Tommy slammed into him, stumbling back a few steps as he wrapped his arms around him.

“Fucking shit, man. I was only gone a few days!” Wilbur said, smiling as he hugged his brother.

“But I was *bored* without you!” Tommy complained, groaning as he buried his face in Wilbur’s shoulder. “Tubbo keeps making me study all the stupid lines and shit for my coronation ceremony.”

Wilbur chuckled, ruffling Tommy’s hair with his hand. “You don’t wanna forget what to say when you’re up there in front of all those people, do you?”

“I’m not gonna forget!” Tommy argued.

Pausing, Wilbur raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you sure?”

Tommy frowned, opening his mouth to insist that yes, he was sure. But after a moment of consideration, he sighed and shook his head.



“Studying is fucking stupid,” he grumbled.

Wilbur huffed. “You say that like you haven’t been obsessing over your textbooks for the past six months.”

Stepping back from the hug, Tommy rolled his eyes. “Just because I don’t wanna do a shit job as king doesn’t mean I *like* studying.”

Something fond curled in Wilbur’s chest hearing that, his smile softening as he reached out to ruffle Tommy’s hair again. “You’re gonna do a great job. I know it.”

Swatting his hand away, Tommy looked at the ground as heat rose to his cheeks. “I hope so.”

Over the past three years, his little brother had really come into his own. He was taller now—still several inches shorter than Wilbur, but he towered over Phil and Tubbo. His shoulders had broadened as he began to fill out some of the lankiness he got from Wilbur, which was only supplemented by the lean muscle he’d developed from all his training with Techno.

But besides his appearance, he’d grown up in a lot of other ways as well. His study habits had improved, and he took far more of an interest in politics than he used to. He never missed a meeting if he could help it, and even if he wasn’t participating, his eyes were always bright and focused, soaking everything in like a sponge.

Wilbur couldn’t have been more proud of him.

Before the conversation could continue in a sappy direction, Tommy perked up again. “Anyway, are you gonna tell me where you fucked off to for four days?” He asked, narrowing his eyes at Wilbur. “Because if you went to that resort planet Big Q was telling us about and you didn’t invite me-”

“No Tommy, I didn’t go there,” Wilbur said, cutting him off. “I actually have a surprise for you.”

“Wait, seriously?!”

Smiling again, Wilbur nodded. “Yup.” He looked over his shoulder, and made a *c’mere* gesture with his hand. “Come on out!”

Stepping out of the doorway, Tommy’s eyes widened the minute he saw who was standing in the hall behind him.

Despite having grown up on Eldingvegr the same as them, Niki seemed out of place surrounded by the shimmering white marble and rose skies after so long. They’d only just stepped off the ship, so her clothes were still torn, and her blossom pink hair looked closer to a dull shade of orange with all the sand stuck in it.

But even still, it was giving Wilbur so much *deja vu* to see Niki on Eldingvegr once again. A kind of familiarity he had been waiting to get back for years now.

“Hi Tommy,” Niki said, giving him a small wave.

Tommy gaped at Niki for a moment, blinking like he wasn't sure if she was real or not.

Then, he started running.

“NIKI!”

He ran into her even harder than he'd run into Wilbur, Niki yelping as she fought to keep her footing. Tommy towered over her now, her face practically invisible as he squeezed her in a near death grip.

“You're okay! Holy shit- you're alive!” He pulled away from the hug to see her face, and Wilbur's chest warmed seeing just how brightly Niki was smiling at Tommy. “Are you okay? Where the fuck did you go? Did you really kill a bunch of Essempi guards when you were escaping-”

“Tommy, don't overwhelm her with questions,” Wilbur cut in, gently pulling Tommy away.

“Sorry I just-” Tommy laughed, reaching out to touch Niki's shoulder like he needed to make sure she was there. “I can't believe Wil actually found you!”

Niki grabbed Tommy's hand off her shoulder and squeezed his fingers. “I'm surprised he did too. I've been hiding out on an Outer Sector planet for the past few years, and when he showed up at my base I didn't even realize who he was at first.”

“You held a knife to my throat,” Wilbur reminded her.

At this, Tommy stiffened, and Wilbur reached out to grab his arm.

“It's okay though, Tommy. I'm fine,” he quickly reassured him.

Some of the tension leaked out of him, but he still flashed Wilbur a worried look as he dropped the hand holding Niki's.

“You've grown up so much,” Niki said softly, looking Tommy up and down before turning her gaze to the room around her. “It's so weird being back here. It doesn't look different at all.”

“You should've seen it after the Antarctic Empire invaded,” Tommy huffed. “This place was a fucking mess. Took us months to clean up- wait, do you even know about that?”

Niki nodded. “Mostly. Wil caught me up to speed on the way over here, though I still feel like there's a lot of details I'm missing.”

“Aw Niki, so much shit has happened,” Tommy said, eyes bright again. “We have so many stories to tell you and so many people you gotta meet-”

Suddenly, a new voice cut Tommy off.

“Is this a party we're missin'?”

Niki stiffened, while Wilbur and Tommy grinned. Speaking of meeting new people.

Looking down the hallway, Wilbur perked up when he saw Phil and Techno making their way towards them. While Phil wasn't always on Eldingvegr, he and Techno had been busy preparing for Tommy's coronation the past few weeks. Techno—acting as the King Regent and all—was rarely seen off Eldingvegr, although Wilbur was sure he was eager to get back to Zephys IV and resume his duties as Emperor.

“Phil! Techno! Wil's back!” Tommy exclaimed, pointing at Wilbur like they'd miss him if they didn't know where to look.

“I can see that,” Phil said with a smile, already opening his arms and wings as Wilbur hurried towards him.

Although it had only been a few days, the last bit of tightness in Wilbur's chest dissipated as Phil wrapped his arms around him. He had to hunch over to rest his head on Phil's shoulder, but he didn't mind in the slightest as Phil's wings arched above their heads.

“Hey Dad,” Wilbur whispered as he pulled away after a moment.

Phil didn't let him get far, and reached out to grab his chin.

“You have sand on you,” Phil pointed out, thumb brushing over the small cuts on his cheek where the sand had rubbed his skin raw.

“Got caught in a sandstorm,” Wilbur explained. “I'm fine though.”

Suddenly, another hand came to rest on his head.

“Why were you in a sandstorm?” Techno asked, using his hand to brush some of the sand out of Wilbur's hair and onto the floor. “And how many guards did you have with you?”

Rolling his eyes, Wilbur pushed Techno's hand away. “I brought five, including Jack.” Techno frowned at this, clearly about to point out how Wilbur needed more, but Wilbur continued talking before he got a chance to speak up. “Anyway, there's someone I want you both to meet.”

Phil and Techno both blinked, glancing over Wilbur's shoulder as if just now noticing the woman standing next to Tommy.

The smile Niki had been wearing before was gone now, replaced with a clenched jaw and tense shoulders as she looked Phil and Techno up and down. Silver eyes darted between Wilbur and the two of them, gaze lingering on the hand Phil still had resting on his back.

*It's okay*, Wilbur mouthed to her, his face just out of view of Phil and Techno.

Some of the storm in Niki's eyes cleared up, but suspicion still lingered over her like a cloud as she took a step towards them both.

Taking this as his cue, Wilbur shook Phil's hand off and moved in between the two sides.

“May I present: Lady Niki Nihachu,” he introduced, gesturing to Niki.

Like with Jack, Niki attempted a curtsy, this one being slightly less stiff. When Wilbur glanced over at Phil and Techno, relief washed over him when he saw his father giving her an appreciative nod.

“Lady Nihachu, it’s an honor to finally meet you,” Phil said once she’d straightened back up. “I’m Philza, Emperor of the Antarctic Empire, but feel free to just call me Phil.”

“Technoblade, Imperator of the Antarctic Empire,” Techno followed, the two of them giving Niki short bows. “Call me Techno though.”

When Wilbur looked back towards Niki, he almost had to cover his mouth to stifle a laugh. Niki’s mouth had dropped open in shock, her eyes as wide as saucers as she glanced between Phil and Techno, the realization that she was talking to two of the most powerful men in the galaxy now settling in.

“You- You’re-” She blinked a few times, pushing her hair back from her face again as she tried to get her bearings. “Tommy called you both Phil and Techno but I didn’t- oh fuck, I’m such a mess right now- I mean shit- wait, no, I didn’t mean to curse I’m sorry-”

“Lady Nihachu, Techno and I will play along with the royal etiquette and all that bullshit, but we really don’t put too much stock into it ourselves, I can assure you,” Phil cut in, smirking at her. “We don’t give a shit about cursing, and Wil just said you were in a sandstorm, so being a bit of a mess is pretty understandable.”

The panic began to fade from Niki’s eyes, but Wilbur noticed her trying to brush the sand off of her pants anyway.

“Okay, um, my apologies anyway for my appearance, Your Majesty and Your Imperial Highness. I wasn’t expecting to meet either of you so soon.”

“We weren’t expectin’ to meet you... well, possibly ever,” Techno said, folding his arms over his chest. “But Wilbur’s been looking for you for ages, and he and Tommy have told us quite a lot of things about you.”

“Oh. Positive things I hope,” Niki tried, nerves bouncing off of her as she shifted from foot to foot.

“It’s been more than positive,” Phil reassured her. “They’ve told us about your role in the Essempi Invasion, and how without you, they might not have been able to escape. So for that, the Antarctic Empire is in your debt.”

Phil bowed at her again, much deeper this time, and Niki looked frozen with shock. As he straightened back up though, she seemed to shake herself out of her stupor, and squared her shoulders to meet Phil’s eyes.

“If the Empire is truly in my debt, then may I make a request?”

Surprise flashed over Phil and Techno’s faces at that.

“Depends on the request,” Techno told her.

Niki nodded, taking a breath to steady herself. “I believe if Themis finds out where I am, they might force me to return there, which isn’t something I want to do. If that happens, can I rely on the Antarctic Empire for protection?”

Although Wilbur had already reassured her she’d have the Empire’s protection, he couldn’t blame her for wanting to ask Phil and Techno directly. Now though, nerves were starting to buzz in his chest, because while he’d made her that promise, he hadn’t actually asked Phil and Techno outright about it.

He couldn’t imagine why they’d say no. Although Themis was bound to want Niki back, she wasn’t royalty. If she was in line for the throne, he could see Themis threatening to start a war over her return. But she wasn’t.

“I just want to point out-” Wilbur cut in before either Phil or Techno could get a word out, “if Themis tries anything, we can always threaten to cut off their blaziphane supply. That should get them to shut up real quick.”

Phil snorted at this. “Yeah, I’m not too afraid of Themis starting shit over a single siren,” he said, looking more amused than anything else at Wilbur’s interruption. “Lady Nihachu, if you wish to stay here, you’d be considered a full citizen of the Antarctic Empire. You’ll be completely under our protection, just like Wil and Tommy are.”

Oh thank fuck.

“That-” Niki’s voice cracked, and she swallowed down a lump in her throat as she nodded. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you. Both of you.”

Wilbur caught her eye again, and flashed her a warm smile. Niki immediately returned it, the last bit of tension leaking out of her shoulders that Wilbur hadn’t even noticed was there.

“Also, I dunno how much you know about hand to hand combat, but if you’re worried about protection I’d also be happy to train you,” Techno jumped in, eyeing the toned muscle on Niki’s arms. “I’ve trained Tommy for years now, and, well, I tried to train Wilbur but he kinda sucked at it-”

“Hey!”

“Though you certainly look like you know how to handle yourself,” Techno finished, ignoring Wilbur’s interruption.

Niki giggled at Wilbur’s pout, before sobering herself up and giving Techno a quick nod. “I’ve had to defend myself before, but I haven’t received any formal combat training since I was a child. I’d love the opportunity to learn more.”

“Oh fuck yes!” Tommy exclaimed, running up beside Niki and grabbing her arm. “Niki, we gotta train together. I bet I could totally kick your ass- well, I wouldn’t kick your ass because I’m a very nice person, but I’ve gotten so good at fighting since Techno started training me.”

“I’d love to train with you, Tommy,” Niki said, nudging his side with her elbow. “But don’t you dare go easy on me. I’ll be able to tell if you do.”

“Well, if the lady insists-”

As Niki, Tommy, and Techno devolved into a discussion about how hard Tommy was allowed to go on Niki during training, Wilbur felt a hand rest on his shoulder, and glanced over to see something warm sitting in the icy blue of his father’s eyes.

“I’m a little surprised,” Phil said quietly, his voice too low for the others to hear. “I can already see a difference in you with her around.”

Wilbur furrowed his brows. “I’m acting different?”

Phil shook his head. “You’re not acting any different. It just looks like... you’re breathing easier now, I suppose.”

Taking a deep breath in, Wilbur thought about the saltwater that always seemed to be present in his lungs these days. It used to burn. The inside of his throat would sting, and he’d try his best to cough it up. But then Phil had taught him to use his anger, to use the waves crashing inside his mind, and he got used to the taste of salt on his tongue.

It never fully stopped burning though. At least, not until now.

The salt was still there. The waves were still there. His anger was still *there*. But he could finally breathe it all in without wincing. The last remnants of his pillar had dissolved, and the waves were finally, truly part of him.

“Thank you, dad,” Wilbur whispered after a moment, “for agreeing to protect her.”

“You don’t need to thank me. She’s important to you, so she’s important to the Empire.” He paused, both of them now watching Niki, Tommy, and Techno’s conversation from afar. “She’s going to be your right hand, isn’t she?”

“I haven’t discussed it with her yet, but I hope so,” Wilbur confessed, pressing his shoulder to Phil’s.

“Don’t worry, mate. If you offer, she’ll say yes.”

Looking over at Phil, Wilbur frowned. “How do you know?”

At the question, Phil gave him a knowing smile as he reached up to brush more sand off of his cheek.

“Because nearly three decades ago, Techno said yes to me.”



No expense was spared for Tommy’s coronation.

Floating orbs of light designed to look like miniature suns hovered near the ceiling, making the shadows along the walls dance as if they were part of the celebration itself. Through the windows, the sky of Dagsbrunstær was a soft shade of rose, the replanted sylfrwood trees shimmering in the twilight glow.

Several long tables had been brought inside the throne room, stretching parallel to the walls, each one filled with nobles both from Eldingvegr and not. The coronation was also being broadcasted for those outside the palace to see, and Wilbur wondered just how many Eldingvegrian citizens were tuning in tonight.

Along with Eldingvegrian Court, many familiar faces from the rest of the Antarctic Empire had made the journey for the ceremony. Across the room, Wilbur could see Ponk and Seapeekay having some deep discussion with Antfrost listening in, Bad and Skeppy were talking to each other in hushed whispers, while Sam stared blankly into his glass of blazihøn. All were dressed in thick coats decorated with shimmering orange gold thread.

Next to the Badlands, Wilbur could also see Michael McChill talking amicably to Aimsey and a few other flora as they all sipped their wine. Like the first time he'd met the man, Michael was dressed in all black—a calf length coat with an oversized collar and a wide belt tied around the waist. Aimsey, meanwhile, wore a sleeveless red waistcoat decorated with bronze, with matching red trousers and a sheer red cloak resting over their shoulders. Wilbur also noticed a pink-haired flora he'd never seen before sitting beside them, but didn't miss the way the flowers on both their cheeks stretched towards each other, while their fingers were interlaced under the table.

On the other side of them, Tina and Karl were whispering to each other as they glanced around the room, although Karl's glazed over eyes told Wilbur that he definitely wasn't seeing the room the same way the rest of them were. As expected, Tina and Karl were dripping with signs of their planet's wealth. Tina wore a lacy black dress with a high neckline and puffed out sleeves, with the front of the dress falling only to her mid-thighs, and the back trailing out down past her ankles like a cape. She also wore the same black headpiece she had on the first time he met her, the black rays stretching out above her dark hair—although this time it was left down instead of up. Beside her, Karl was wearing a similar cloak to his usual attire, although this one was black like Tina's dress, and fell all the way down to his ankles. Instead of the gold circlet he wore before, now he had a gold ring resting on the back of his head, almost as if it was meant to mimic a halo.

And of course, Schlatt was there as well. To Wilbur's surprise, when he'd first taken his seat, he saw that Schlatt and Quackity were sitting side by side. Although Quackity had never mentioned knowing Schlatt before, the two seemed to be acquainted. Every once in a while, Schlatt would tell Quackity something with a sleazy grin, and Quackity would scowl at him like he was two seconds away from slapping him across the face. Both of them were chugging their blazihøn, and he was sure the two were going to be piss drunk as soon as the ceremony ended.

Despite the fact that Eldingvegr was much warmer than Zephys IV, Schlatt was still bundled up in far too many furs for indoor attire. He wore a heavy, dark fur coat that fell to his ankles and was buttoned up all the way to his mid-chest, revealing the black ruffled collar of the

shirt he had on underneath. He was also still rattling with every step thanks to the steel and silver jewelry practically falling off of him, and Wilbur would be very surprised if he could keep his balance under all of that while drunk.

Although Quackity was dressed formally, it was obvious he wasn't nobility or royal like everyone else in the room. This also raised the question of how he was there in the first place since he wasn't royal or a politician, but Quackity was a man of many talents, so Wilbur was sure he had his ways. Ignoring that though, Quackity's suit was certainly expensive, black and decorated with a pattern of gold feathers along the arms and legs with the same kind of ripple effect that his tattoos had. Despite the formality of the occasion though, he still had that knit cap shoved over his head, and Wilbur almost wanted to laugh at his dedication to never taking it off.

Since stepping into the throne room, Wilbur had been herded over to the opposite side of the room from the politicians. While he was slightly annoyed by this, he also knew that he'd have plenty of time to chat with them after the ceremony. Besides, he'd seen most of them multiple times since that first summit. He'd flown to Serenity to work out a trade issue they were having, he'd participated in renegotiating certain terms of The Badlands alliance with the Empire, and, well, he technically went to Mantle for business quite a bit, but more than half his time there was spent getting drunk with Schlatt. Not that Phil needed to know that.

On their side of the room, Wilbur had been seated at the part of the table nearest to the throne. Phil and Techno's seats were across from him and currently empty, although Wilbur knew they'd arrive at the same time Tommy did. Tubbo's seat was also supposed to be across from him, but again, it was empty thanks to what his role in the coronation was going to be.

So for the moment, it was only him and Niki sitting nearest to the throne, while the rest of the Eldingvegr nobility sat a few chairs away from them.

"Is my hair still okay?" Niki suddenly asked, startling Wilbur out of his thoughts.

Looking over, Wilbur saw Niki showing him the back of her head. Her jagged haircut had been evened out by a hairdresser, and for the coronation, the pink strands had been woven into short braids that were twisted into small buns on the back of her head. Her silver and gold headpiece covered most of her hair from the front, wrapping around the braids like a fan with gems sewn into the fabric itself.

"It looks fine," he reassured her after making sure there were no pieces of hair sticking out of place.

Turning back around, Niki groaned as she dragged her hands down her face. "Thanks. I keep wanting to touch it to make sure nothing fell out, but then my hand bumps into this headpiece and I get scared I'm gonna move it out of place."

"I'll let you know if it goes sideways or flips backwards," Wilbur teased, nudging her side.

Niki rolled her eyes. "You try moving around in this- well, actually, I think your coat is longer than mine."



She had a point there. Niki was dressed in a sleeveless gown that went down her ankles, and shimmered a soft shade of silver that almost matched her eyes. Over her shoulders, she wore a high-collared shrug cardigan in the same shade of silver as the rest of her dress, that had such long sleeves, they fell well past her wrists and draped all the way to the floor. Stars carved from gold decorated the shoulders of the shrug as well, glittering every time she moved one way or another.

Usually, this kind of dress would be something Wilbur had no comparison to. The long sleeves alone seemed like a nightmare to deal with. However, his own coat trailed well past his ankles and onto the floor behind him. It was deep blue, the back decorated with intricate gold embroidery trailing all the way down to the cape. It had a high collar that kept digging into his chin, and he was constantly torn between fiddling with that, or readjusting the silver circlet resting on top of his head—the black gems embedded inside shaped to look like feathers.

It was honestly a miracle he hadn't fallen flat on his face walking into the throne room.

"I can't believe I'm actually here," Niki whispered after a minute of silence, eyes drifting to the empty throne. "Growing up, I always knew I'd eventually attend Tommy's coronation, but it felt so far away." She paused, pressing her lips together as she glanced back down at her hands, covered in scars from the years on her own. "In a way though, it feels like a lifetime since I last thought about Tommy's coronation."

Wilbur understood what she meant. So much had changed since the days when he and Niki would talk about the things they would do at Tommy's coronation. They used to joke about making a scene involving some spilled wine, or embarrassing him with funny stories from his childhood during the following dinner. Of course, they'd never do either of these things. Neither one wanted to ruin the most important day of Tommy's life.

But to actually be sitting here, waiting for his brother to get crowned the King? When three years ago Wilbur didn't even know if he and Tommy would ever see Eldingvegr again?

It was strange. Not in a bad way, but strange nonetheless. Almost as if this was a dream, and any minute Wilbur would wake up, finding himself in that damn crawlspace again.

While the nightmares were far rarer these days, they'd never gone away completely. Two nights before, Tommy had knocked on his door and crawled into his bed, trembling as he whispered the remnants of his dream into Wilbur's ear. Wilbur just held him close, burying his face in his little brother's hair and reassuring him that they were okay now. Nothing could hurt them anymore, and they both knew it.

"It really does," Wilbur agreed, nervously fiddling with the hem of his sleeve.

Another beat passed. Niki looked away from the throne, and at the rest of the table behind them. Suddenly, she stiffened.

"Wilbur," she whispered, leaning close to his ear, "there's someone staring at you."

The hairs on the back of Wilbur's neck rose up. He kept his face neutral, casually glancing over his shoulder to try and see who Niki was referring to.

Ranboo looked away the second Wilbur turned his head.

"That's Ranboo," Wilbur explained, dark bitterness bubbling up inside of him. "Techno's protege."

At this, Niki's eyes widened, before narrowing as the realization set in. "The spy," she said, her voice dripping with disdain.

Although it had been years since Ranboo's betrayal came to light, a nasty part of Wilbur still held onto a grudge. It was a heavy, bitter thing that sat balled up in his chest like a rock, and he wished he could let it go. While Tommy was still wary around Ranboo, he'd learned how to slowly let go of his anger towards his former friend.

The first time Wilbur and Tommy went back to Zephyr IV after getting Eldingvegr back, Ranboo had apologized over and over and over again for his actions. It got to the point where Techno had to order him to leave the brothers alone, because he wouldn't stop following them and trying to gain their favor back.

As time passed, he backed off little by little. It was only then that Wilbur noticed the way Ranboo flinched every time one of them came near. Or how his shoulders would tense up if Tommy so much as glanced his way. At first, Wilbur thought it was his own guilt eating away at him, and maybe that was part of it. But for the most part, it was fear. Fear of having one of their Voices used on him again. Fear of being turned into a puppet once more, forced to spill out all his ugly secrets for the world to bear witness to.

Out of the three who had been betrayed by Ranboo—Wilbur, Tommy, and Aimsey—Aimsey had been the only one to properly forgive him. It had taken time, but they were so deeply and inherently kind, Wilbur had known it was going to happen eventually. Though he was sure Aimsey was very careful with their words around him nowadays.

"He's probably staring at you," Wilbur said after a moment, turning back to Niki. "I'm sure he's wondering who you are."

Furrowing her brows, Niki glanced Ranboo's way again. "He's... younger than I thought he would be."

"Oh, yeah, he's around Tommy's age," Wilbur explained, ignoring the weight of Ranboo's stare against the side of his head.

"Huh. Interesting," Niki murmured, before turning her focus back to what was in front of her. Her eyes settled on the throne again, and her frown deepened. "I'll admit, it's strange to be here without Eret." She blinked, settling her hands on her lap. "Do you know what planet they ended up on?"

Wilbur shook his head. "No. The conditions of their exile was just that it had to be a planet unaffiliated with the Antarctic Empire."

“You don’t think they would’ve gone to an Essempi planet, do you?”

“No, of course not. Essempi knows they’re the reason the Antarctic Empire won Eldingvegr so easily. If they were to find Eret, their head would end up in a basket faster than Dream’s did.”

His voice remained steady, even when mentioning Dream. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the execution he never thought he’d witness. He remembered the fear dancing in Dream’s bright green eyes. He remembered the way the waves roared in his ears, pushing his anger up and up as he watched the man beg for his life with contempt running through his veins. He remembered the way blood stained the legs of his pants from standing too close.

Memories of Dream often made an appearance in his nightmares. His execution though was not one of them.

“Do you know why Foolish chose to go with them?” Niki then asked.

“He said it was because they were an old friend, and he also felt like he didn’t have a place on Eldingvegr without them around,” Wilbur explained, resting his elbows on the table.

“Tommy tried so hard to get him to stay. He even promised to do all his homework on time for the next year, but Foolish insisted he had to go.”

“Tommy doing his homework on time?” Niki snorted. “He really has grown up since I’ve been gone.”

Although it was said as a joke, Wilbur couldn’t stop a soft smile from stretching over his face at that. “He really has.”

As if on cue, there was the sound of footsteps echoing over the room, silencing all conversation at once. Wilbur straightened in his seat as Phil and Techno walked in through the large doors leading into the throne room, and he flashed back to the relief he’d felt three years prior when those two had appeared in that doorway to save his and Tommy’s lives.

The two stood side to side as they made their way between the tables. Phil was wearing an ornately embroidered long-sleeved shirt that was the signature pale blue of the Antarctic Empire, the shoulders bare to keep his wings free. Heavy rings decorated his fingers, and part of his hair was pulled back into an intricate braid. Along with that, this was one of the only times Wilbur had seen Phil wear his actual crown—a sharp thing made of twisted black metal, so reminiscent of the palace of Zephyr IV itself.

Beside him, Techno wasn’t wearing a crown, but looked no less royal for it. His coat was a massive thing—a puffed out fur collar making his already hulking frame look even larger than it actually was. The coat itself was the same shade of blue as Phil’s shirt, and had similar silver embroidery stretching from the front to the back. His pink hair was in an even more complex braid than Phil’s, with pieces of gold and silver threaded into the strands, while even more jewelry hung off his ears and neck.

As they passed by Wilbur’s part of the table, Phil turned to flash a small smile at him, which Wilbur quickly returned. The two walked up the steps to the landing in front of the throne

itself, turning around to face both sides of the room.

Neither one said anything. Their eyes skimmed over both sides, before bowing in acknowledgement. Then, they walked back down to the table Wilbur was sitting at, and took their seats across from him and Niki.

Once the Emperor and Imperator had acknowledged the ceremony, that meant it was finally time for the event to start.

The throne room doors opened again. First, Puffy and Jack stepped through, nodding at the gathered groups and taking their positions on either side of the doors. Then, Tubbo was the next to appear.

After his failed attempt at stabbing Dream, Tommy had tossed aside his grudge and forgiven Tubbo by scolding him for being an idiot and nearly getting himself killed. Wilbur also found it was difficult to hold onto his anger when he'd nearly seen the kid get executed for them, and more than anything, was just happy Tommy had gotten his best friend back.

Since then, Tubbo had been given the opportunity to move past the role of a servant, and had worked his way up the ladder to be appointed as a member of Tommy's future council. When it came to coronations, the monarch was given the choice of who on their council they wished to actually perform the ceremony. So no one was surprised when Tommy decided he wanted Tubbo to be the one to do it.

Wearing the traditional robes, Tubbo was dressed in a floor length white cloak, with only minor pieces of gold embroidery detailing the hem. His mottled blonde and brown hair was pushed down by a plain silver circlet, although a few unruly spots were still sticking out here and there.

As Tubbo stepped up to the landing in front of the throne, he squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath. Wilbur noticed his hands were trembling as he curled them into fists.

Then, he opened his eyes, and his voice rang out.

"Today, it is your great privilege to bear witness to the birth of a new era for our planet!"

He was reciting lines, but it didn't sound like it. Tubbo's words were filled with power and commanded respect, forcing everyone in the room to look his way and acknowledge what he said as truth. This was the birth of a new era for their planet. This was the beginning of a new story. Not just for Eldingvegr, but for Tommy himself.

"You have all gathered here today in attendance for the crowning of a new King of Eldingvegr. He is the rightful king both in blood, and in merit, having proven himself as worthy through trials and tribulations unseen by his predecessors for thousands of years. I now present to you the heir to the throne, Theseus!"

And just like that, everyone turned to the doors to watch Tommy enter the room.

Wilbur hardly remembered anything from being four years old. It was still that hazy space where you might be able to recall bits and pieces, flashes of color or snippets of songs, but very few whole, intact memories.

But one thing Wilbur could remember from being four years old was the first time he saw Tommy. He didn't remember when his mother went into labor, and he didn't remember what he did while he was waiting for his little brother to be born. But he remembered being led into the room afterwards. He remembered his mother's face, lined with exhaustion but filled with so much love at the same time, her smile alone was enough to warm him from the inside out.

Tommy had been a tiny baby. Smaller than he was supposed to be, to the point where the doctors were concerned for his health. But when Wilbur walked into that room, he heard his little brother let out an ear piercing wail, like he was announcing his own presence to the world.

He kept crying as Wilbur approached the bed. His hands shook, because he was curious, but didn't want to hurt his new brother. His mother took his hand in hers, and gently placed it on top of Tommy's small head, reassuring him that it was okay.

For a brief moment, Tommy's small hand had reached up and wrapped around his thumb. Immediately, his cries were silenced, and he blinked as he stared at Wilbur for the first time. And that was when Wilbur knew that Tommy was his, and he was Tommy's.

The young man making his way to the front of the throne room wasn't small anymore. He was tall and fair-haired with eyes that burnt like the coldest flames. His shoulders were perfectly straight, covered by a heavy cloak that glittered with the finest gold and silver threads. These threads crossed over the entirety of the cloak, elaborate embroidery swirling around itself to represent the winds that had taken so much from them.

His steps were even, and careful as could be with the cloak trailing along the ground behind him. He kept his chin up as he made his way up the steps to the throne, although Wilbur could see the way his jaw was clenched even from here.

Tommy gave Tubbo a slight nod as he passed, before settling himself on the seat of the throne. There was a moment of breathless silence, and even Tubbo seemed a bit startled by the air of power that crackled around Tommy like electricity. But after a moment, he recovered, and dug into his pocket to pull out a glass vial of blaziphane.

"Theseus," Tubbo began, pulling the cork out of the vial to pour a small bit of blaziphane onto his thumb. "Will you solemnly promise to govern the Peoples of Eldingvegr with Law, Justice, and Mercy at hand?"

Glancing up at Tubbo, Tommy nodded.

"I will."

With a hum, Tubbo reached out and smeared a bit of the blaziphane onto the center of Tommy's forehead in a diagonal line.

“Will you solemnly promise to protect the Peoples of Sólsid, Nóttid, and the Rökkrring to the best of your abilities?”

Another nod.

“I will.”

More blaziphane was added to Tommy’s forehead, with another diagonal line in the opposite direction, creating an ‘X’ shape.

“Will you solemnly promise to dedicate your life in service of Eldingvegr and her interests?”

Tommy took a deep breath, before giving a final nod.

“I will.”

The last bit of blaziphane was spread in a horizontal line between the ‘X’, creating a shape that was reminiscent of a star.

After recorking the vial, Tubbo put the blaziphane back in his pocket. Then, he stepped to the side to take the crown from a servant. The crown itself was a headpiece made up of thin, gold rays fanning out in all different directions, designed to look like the sun itself was shining behind the wearer’s head.

After making his way back in front of everyone, Tubbo held the crown up to the wall to the right of the throne.

“I present to the daylight of Sólsid, the rightful King Theseus!” He declared, holding the crown up to the sigil of the sun painted onto the wall.

He then turned to the opposite wall—left of the throne itself, with a sigil of the moon painted on it.

“I present to the moonlight of Nóttid, the rightful King Theseus!”

Next was the wall directly behind the throne, with a sigil of stars twinkling painted on the wall.

“I present to the twilight of the Rökkrring, the rightful King Theseus!”

And lastly, there was the wall that the throne room doors were on, where a sigil of wind gusts was painted. Tubbo was now facing the gathered crowd, holding the crown up for all of them to see.

“And I present to the winds that cross the expanse of all three, the rightful King Theseus!”

Then, Tubbo turned back around, and stepped over so he was standing right in front of Tommy. He held the crown just above his head, and Wilbur could barely hear his own breathing over the blood roaring in his ears.

“I crown thee Theseus Thomas Íóni, Protector of Day and Night, Dawn and Dusk, Lord of Dagsbrunstær, and King of Eldingvegr!”

Tubbo lowered the crown onto Tommy’s head, before stepping back so the crowd could see their new king.

Sunrays burst from behind Tommy’s curls, fanning around his head like a halo. The blazipthane on his forehead shifted between shades of orange and gold with every small movement, and icy flames danced in his eyes as the title of King settled onto his shoulders for the very first time.

“All hail King Theseus!”

As soon as the words left Tubbo’s mouth, the room exploded into applause. Wilbur jumped to his feet, eyes burning as the widest smile he’d ever worn stretched across his cheeks. He clapped and yelled out wordless cheers, a thousand emotions swirling inside of him all at once.

His brother. The King.

Wilbur was practically suffocating from how proud he was of Tommy in that moment.

Beside him, Niki had tears pouring down her cheeks, although she was smiling just as wide as he was. Across the table, Phil and Techno were both beaming, obvious pride glinting in both their gazes (though Techno’s especially).

As Tommy’s eyes flickered over the room, there was a brief moment where his gaze met Wilbur’s. And just for that moment, everything else in the room faded away, and it was only the two of them.

Eventually, the cheering began to die down, and their eye contact broke. Tubbo gestured for everyone to take their seats, which they all did save for two people—Phil and Techno.

With a nod from Tubbo, Phil and Techno approached the steps leading up to the throne. Tommy rose to his feet, wobbling a bit under the weight of the crown on his head, but quickly readjusted himself so he was standing face to face with the Emperor and the Imperator.

They all shared a look. Then, Tommy held a fist up to his chest, and bowed to them both.

“Under the eyes of my People, I swear Eldingvegr’s loyalty to the Antarctic Empire,” Tommy declared, his voice filled with a steady confidence Wilbur had rarely heard from him before.

Once he straightened back up, Techno took a step forward, reaching out to grab Tommy’s hand in his own.

“Under the eyes of your People, as Imperator of the Antarctic Empire, I swear to protect Eldingvegr and her interests as if it was my own home,” Techno promised, his words booming over the room.

There was a brief moment where they shared a soft smile, and Tommy leaned forward the smallest bit, his forehead bumping against Techno's with their hands gripped tightly between them. Using his other hand, Techno gave Tommy an affectionate squeeze on the back of his neck, and it was obvious Tommy was holding back laughter.

As quickly as it happened though, it was over. Techno pulled away, folding his hands behind his back as he moved beside Phil once more.

Then, Phil stepped forward, and took Tommy's hand into his own.

"Under the eyes of our People, as Emperor of the Antarctic Empire, I accept Eldingvegr under my name," Phil proclaimed, squeezing Tommy's hand with a wide grin.

And just like that, everyone was cheering again.

As expected, the opposite table where the other politicians sat was the loudest part of the room. But there was still plenty of cheering from their side as well. Technically, this part of the ceremony was just for show. Eldingvegr had been part of the Antarctic Empire for three years now. But without a proper monarch, a proper pledge hadn't been made. Until now.

Wilbur's heart began to pound louder in his chest now. The cheering died down, and he took a breath to try and steady himself as he moved away from the table and towards the throne.

He could immediately hear the confused murmurs breaking out from the table behind him. While many in the room knew what was going on, there were more who didn't—specifically, the Eldingvegrian nobility.

This was going to be interesting.

Noticing his approach, Phil and Techno stepped off to the side. Tubbo moved back to Tommy's side, and Wilbur walked until he was right at the steps leading up to the throne. Then, he stopped.

"King Theseus, I present to you Prince Orpheus Wilbur Sóti," Tubbo said, gesturing to Wilbur.

Tommy took a step forward, and Wilbur knelt before him. While it was strange to kneel to his own brother, something had shifted in Tommy when the crown had been placed on his head. There was an air around him now that hadn't been there before. Something that demanded respect. Something that was full of *power*.

Once Tommy was right in front of him, Wilbur glanced up, his hair falling into his eyes. He met Tommy's gaze, and noticed the crease between his brother's brows. There was a silent question burning in his eyes.

*Are you sure about this?*

With cool water rushing in his head, Wilbur gave a subtle nod.

*Yes.*



Taking a deep breath, Tommy straightened up again.

“Orpheus,” he began, stuttering slightly at having to use Wilbur’s formal name. “with the power my people have granted me, my first act as King of Eldingvegr-” his voice was shaking now, but he forced himself to keep going, “is to revoke your title as Prince of Eldingvegr, and strip you of your name.”

There was a sharp gasp throughout the room. Wilbur could feel dozens of stares boring into the back of his head, but focused on counting the waves in his head instead.

*In for four; out for eight. Rinse and repeat as the waves crash over and over and over again.*

“Do you accept my will as truth?” Tommy then asked.

Blood roaring in his ears, Wilbur nodded.

“I do.”

His voice was low, but it boomed across the room anyway.

Swallowing down a lump in his throat, Tommy returned his nod, before taking a step back. And just as quickly, Phil moved forward to take his place.

“As Emperor of the Antarctic Empire, and King of Zephyrs IV, through the power my people have granted me, I wish to grant you a new name and a new title,” Phil declared. “Do you accept my will as truth?”

This time, Wilbur found a smile spreading over his face.

“I do.”

And Phil’s smile was a familiar one. Because it was the same as the one he’d made that night in the hangar, when Wilbur had used his Voice on him for the first time. The pride was there. The love was there.

Warmth washed over Wilbur like liquid sunlight.

“Then from this moment on, you will be known as my son, Orpheus Wilbur Soot, Crown Prince of Zephyrs IV, and heir to the Antarctic Empire,” Phil continued, his words echoing off the walls. “With this title comes the knowledge that one day you will take my place as Protector of the Antarctic Empire and her allies, King of Zephyrs IV, and Emperor of The Nether, Kinoko, Serenity, Floslium, Mantle, and Eldingvegr. When the time comes, will you solemnly promise to fulfill these duties to the best of your ability?”

This wasn’t any kind of surprise to Wilbur. They had planned this. In fact, they’d rehearsed this exact ceremony. Wilbur had known he was Phil’s chosen heir for almost a year now.

But there was still something different between speaking in hypotheticals about becoming the heir, and actually being proclaimed as such in front of some of the most important people in

the galaxy. There was something different about knowing the oath he was going to take, and actually having to take it.

One day, Wilbur would be crowned King of Zephyrs IV, and Emperor of the Antarctic Empire. One day, Wilbur would sit on Phil's throne, wear his crown of twisted metal, and preside over the most powerful Empire in the entire galaxy. One day, Wilbur would truly be able to say that he had become *more*.

There were many different types of power in their world. There was the power of words, and the power of swords. The power of decisions, and the power of stepping back.

There was power in embracing the destiny you'd been born to, like Tommy had.

There was also power in rejecting what you were born to, and embracing a new destiny you were never meant to have.

There was power in fighting the waves, but there was also power in accepting them as part of you, and letting the saltwater flood through your veins.

A shudder ran down his spine, but it wasn't from fear.

"I will," he swore to his father.

Those glacier eyes were impossibly warm as Phil held out a hand to help Wilbur to his feet. He squeezed Wilbur's fingers, and Wilbur leaned into his side, smiling to himself as Phil's wing came to wrap around his shoulders.

Once they were both standing side by side in front of the throne, Phil spoke up again.

"Technoblade, Emperor of the Antarctic Empire and Ambassador to the Nether, please come forward."

Walking around to the steps, Techno knelt in front of them both, his braid hanging over his shoulder as he rested a single hand on his sword. When he lifted his head, gold eyes met brown, and Wilbur was surprised to see that Phil wasn't the only one looking at him with pride today.

"I, Technoblade, Emperor of the Antarctic Empire and Ambassador to the Nether," Techno began, reciting the oath he'd already memorized, "under the eyes of our People, swear loyalty to Emperor Philza and his named heir, the Prince Orpheus. I pledge fealty to them both, and shall defend them and their interests against all enemies."

Wilbur reached out a hand to help Techno to his feet. Once Techno was standing, he then moved back around to stand on Phil's other side.

"Tina, Princess of Kinoko and Duchess of Atramentaria, and Marquise Karl Amanita, Seer of the Church of the Other and the Between, both of you please come forward," Phil then called out.

Although they'd been told about this beforehand, Tina's eyes were wide as she made her way up to the steps, dragging Karl behind her by the hand. The two knelt down side by side, and he and Phil waited for them to make their oaths.

"I, Princess Tina of Kinoko and Duchess of Atramentaria..." Tina recited the oath, the lacy cape of her gown pooling behind her like fabric was made of liquid.

Once she had finished, it was Karl's turn. He repeated the oath the same as she did, and Wilbur reached out to help them both up as they got to their feet again.

When Karl's hand wrapped around his, the Seer's gaze sharpened in a way Wilbur had never seen before, and stiffened at the pointed look he gave him.

*I told you so*, Karl mouthed.

All those years ago, and now Karl's prediction had finally come true. Despite how grateful Wilbur was for the way things turned out, he was a little annoyed that he'd been right considering how smug he was about the whole thing during the first summit.

After Tina and Karl had sat down again, Phil called up Michael McChill, who took the oath on behalf of Serenity. Then, he did the same for the flora representative from Floslium, and Wilbur could practically feel Aimsey's smile from all the way across the room.

Then, second to last,

"President J. Texas Schlatt of Mantle, please come forward," Phil ordered.

Quackity rolled his eyes as Schlatt stumbled to his feet, the blazihøn slowing him down as he made his way to the front of the room. Instead of kneeling gracefully like all the others, Schlatt half-fell onto the steps, but righted himself before he could make a scene. Maybe Wilbur should've been annoyed. After all, this was supposed to be Schlatt swearing his loyalty to his future Emperor, and here he was drunk off his ass.

But in all honesty, Wilbur knew what Schlatt was like, and he wouldn't have expected anything less of his friend.

There was a long moment of silence after Schlatt got into the proper kneeling position, his coat twisted awkwardly around him as he glanced between Phil and Wilbur. It got to the point where Wilbur was beginning to wonder if Schlatt had forgotten what he was supposed to say, and was about to mouth the words to him when,

"I, President J. Texas Schlatt of Mantle, under the eyes of our People, swear loyalty to Emperor Philza and his named heir, the Prince Orpheus..." he continued on with the rest of his oath, not missing a single line of it.

When Wilbur reached out to help Schlatt to his feet, their eyes locked, and Schlatt flashed him a razor sharp smirk.

"Good on you, loverboy," Schlatt whispered, far too low for anyone else to hear.

With that, Schlatt let go of his hand and stumbled back to his seat. Quackity moved his own cup of blazihøn out of the way when Schlatt sat back down, obviously wary of Schlatt's flailing arms as he struggled to balance himself.

For a brief moment, Wilbur and Quackity's eyes met, and Quackity lifted his glass to Wilbur in a silent toast. Wilbur gave him a subtle nod in acknowledgement.

Finally, they were on the last planet.

"Theseus Thomas Ióni, King of Eldingvegr, please come forward."

Tommy, who had been standing off to the side with Tubbo, moved back around to the front of the steps. Now it was his turn to kneel, and he looked like he was struggling to keep his crown from slipping off as he settled himself in front of Wilbur.

Once there though, he looked up again, and more warmth rushed over Wilbur when Tommy gave him a smile bright enough to rival the sun he wore on the back of his head.

"I, Theseus Thomas Ióni, Protector of the Day and Night, Dawn and Dusk, Lord of Dagsbrunstær, and King of Eldingvegr," he began, his words steady, "under the eyes of our People, swear loyalty to Emperor Philza and his named heir, the Prince Orpheus. I pledge fealty to them both, and shall defend them and their interests against all enemies."

Wilbur matched Tommy's smile with his own as he reached out a hand to help his brother up. Before Tommy could step back though, Wilbur tightened the grip on his hand, and pulled him close so their foreheads were almost touching.

"And I, Orpheus Wilbur Soot," he began in a rushed whisper, "swear loyalty to my brother, Theseus Thomas Ióni, King of Eldingvegr."

Tommy let out a shaky laugh, squeezing Wilbur's hand as tightly as he could.

"You dramatic prick," he whispered before finally pulling away.

After Tommy had moved back beside Tubbo, that only left Phil and Wilbur facing each other in front of the throne.

"Then I, Philza, King of Zephys IV and Emperor of the Antarctic Empire, under the eyes of our People, do hereby name you Orpheus Wilbur Soot, Crown Prince of Zephys IV, and heir to the Antarctic Empire."

Wilbur bowed his head to his father.

The rest of the room bowed to both of them.

Looking around, something like victory curled in Wilbur's chest seeing the Eldingvegrian nobility that used to scorn him now bow to him as their future Emperor. Standing near them, Ranboo was wearing a surprisingly genuine smile, while Niki was absolutely beaming. Near the back of the room, Jack was giving him a thumbs up, and Wilbur had to hold himself back from snorting at that.

And then his family—Tommy, Techno, and Phil—well, they were the proudest out of anyone in the room.

As everyone else stayed in their bows, Tommy and Techno made their way over to join him and Phil. Once again, Tommy grabbed his hand as they stood side by side. Techno rested a hand on both their shoulders. Then Phil placed a hand on the back of Wilbur's neck, and this time, Wilbur knew it wasn't a threat. In fact, it was anything but.

It was a silent promise.

A reassurance.

A reminder that Wilbur was allowed to reach for the stars, and if he did, the stars would reach back.

## Chapter End Notes

This is the longest story I've ever written.

I'm getting so emotional as I'm preparing to post this. I started writing stars in april of 2022, and now it's january of 2023. but I had the idea for stars even earlier than that. I came up with the concept for this fic back in november of 2021. It feels so unreal to actually be finished with it.

I never expected stars to take so long to write, but honestly I'm so glad I took my time with it. I let the story carry me instead of forcing it to go at a faster pace for my own satisfaction. I let things build as naturally as I could. I dove into Wilbur's mind, understanding every decision he made, every emotion he was feeling. I tried out new writing techniques and forced myself to get good at them. I came up with so much worldbuilding, and have sticky notes all over my bedroom walls detailing so much information about this fictional galaxy I've invested so much time into.

stars is a story about realizing your own worth. it's a story about using the anger inside of you. it's not a story about perfect people. it's about both embracing and rejecting fate. it's about learning how to reach for the stars, and having people around you who believe that the stars will reach back.

this might come off as really sappy, but stars has meant a lot to me to write. it's proof of my own skills. it's something I'm completely and unequivocally proud of. and it's just a story I really wanted to tell the right way, and I think I achieved that. so thank you so much to everyone who read this while it was ongoing, and thanks to everyone who will be reading this long after the last chapter was posted. thank you to my comments, and thank you to all the asks I got on my tumblr analyzing every chapter I posted. you guys all kept me going.

and special thank you to two people who were instrumental in this fic turning out the way it did. the first was @moonfly on ao3, who helped me come up with this concept in the first place and helped establish so much of the building blocks for the story. the second is @birdfeet on ao3, who spent countless hours brainstorming with me, giving me feedback, reading so many of my chapters before I published them to reassure me they were good—eli, your support has meant the world, so thank you so much and I can't wait to see you in march :)

ok anyway enough of being sappy. let me know in the comments if you enjoyed! also, if you're sad stars is over, I just posted the second chapter of my next big project, [through a glass divine](#). now that stars is complete, I'll be updating this as regularly as I can, so make sure to check it out!

if you like my work and wanna talk about it with other readers, check it out my discord server here <https://discord.gg/HF4z3SqUgE>

there's a playlist for this fic, so check that out [here](#). also special shoutout to [this](#), [this](#), and [especially this](#). I listened to these playlists so much while writing this fic. perfect background noise for sure.

that's all for now. hmu on tumblr and twitter @bonesandthebees

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!